

# **For Reference**

---

**NOT TO BE TAKEN FROM THIS ROOM**

# For Reference

NOT TO BE TAKEN FROM THIS ROOM

Ex LIBRIS  
UNIVERSITATIS  
ALBERTAEISIS











THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

THE PEASANT WORLD OF J. M. SYNGE

BY



JOSEPH M. ZEZULKA

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

OF MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

FALL, 1969



UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to  
the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance a thesis entitled The  
Peasant World of J. M. Synge, submitted by Joseph M. Zezulka in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.



### Abstract

For John Millington Synge, drama was made serious "by the degree in which it gives the nourishment, not very easy to define, on which our imaginations live." Its two main elements must be what he called "reality" and "joy." To incorporate these into his drama, Synge turned to the Irish peasantry and to the Irish past, to Gaelic literature and folk-tradition. In this past he found the source of the spirit and of the imaginativeness which he saw reflected in the attitudes and in the folk-imagination of the Irish peasantry as he had come to know it.

By fusing his knowledge of Gaelic literature with his observations of Irish peasant life, Synge was able to create a dramatic peasant world that is rich in colourful diction, character, and incident. His peasant figures are often extravagant, full of the extremes of joy and sorrow, which, Synge believed, most clearly depict the native imaginativeness of the Irish peasant. Synge's vision of the Irish peasant is not a realistic, but a poetic vision; the basis of his drama is in reality imaginatively conceived. His peasant figures consequently oscillate between extremes, between modern faith and ancient paganism, between the difficulties of everyday life and the flights of fancy in which they can find relief from their daily cares.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

| CHAPTER   | PAGE |
|---|------|
| I      INTRODUCTION.....                                    | 1    |
| II     PAGANISM AND CHRISTIANITY.....                       | 9    |
| III    THE ROMANTIC IDEAL AND THE DESPOTISM OF REALITY..... | 36   |
| IV    THE IMAGINATION AS LIBERATOR.....                     | 57   |
| V     CONCLUSION.....                                       | 76   |
| FOOTNOTES.....  | 79   |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY.....   | 84   |



## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In the Preface to The Tinker's Wedding John Millington Synge states that drama, "like the symphony, does not teach or prove anything" (IV,3).<sup>1</sup> True to his own dictum, Synge avoided didacticism and was not analytical or moralistic in his approach to the basic conflicts of his characters. Yet he maintained that, in its own way, his drama was serious.

For Synge drama is made serious not by the seriousness of the social problems with which it may be concerned, but "by the degree in which it gives the nourishment, not very easy to define, on which our imaginations live" (IV,3). Synge himself could not exactly define, or perhaps his early death prevented him from defining, the source of that nourishment. He was nevertheless quite certain that the secret source lay in what he called "reality" and "joy," the two elements he thought were most lacking in modern drama. The reality of which he spoke was not to be found in the "joyless and pallid words" of Ibsen or Zola, nor was the joy to be found in the "false joy of the musical comedy" (IV, 53-54). Joy could only be found, Synge believed, "in what is superb and wild in reality" (IV,54); for reality one must in turn go to "the springtime of the local life" (IV,54).

Synge himself found the "springtime of the local life" among the primitive people of the Aran Islands, and among the peasantry of Kerry and Wicklow, among whom the flavor of that springtime was preserved in ballads, superstitions, and a fine folk-imagination. He supplemented his personal observations of peasant life with his own



acquaintance with Irish poetry and saga to create a superb peasant drama, rich in colorful diction and character. I propose to consider in this dissertation the world of the Irish peasant, as it is presented to us by Synge, and to investigate the influence of myth, superstition, tradition, and popular folk-lore on the creation of his characters.

The "Irishness" of Synge's characters has often been questioned. The presentation of a Synge play in the early years of the Abbey Theatre movement was almost characteristically accompanied by disturbances in the audience, followed by a denunciation of the play in the press.<sup>2</sup> These denunciations often centered on Synge's own "un-Irishness," by virtue of the fact that he nominally belonged to the Ascendancy class, that he slandered Irish institutions, namely the sanctity of marriage and the virtue of Irish women, and moreover, his critics claimed, that he used un-Irish models for his plays. It is rather questionable whether the fulminations of Arthur Griffith in The United Irishman of 1903, or those of other critics of his ilk in other unsympathetic newspapers constitute true literary criticism. They are noteworthy, however, because of the enduring effect they seem to have had on many later critics. If he could have written without bias, Daniel Corkery's book on Synge in 1931 might have been the most important contribution to Synge scholarship up to that time.<sup>3</sup> The value of the book is unfortunately marred by a fervent Catholic nationalism that attributes Synge's virtues to his Irish sympathies, and his faults to his rather tenuous links with England via the Ascendancy class in Ireland.

The claim that Synge used un-Irish models for his plays is simply untrue, with the exception of one play, The Well of the Saints.<sup>4</sup>



The suggestions for the plots of The Shadow of the Glen, Riders to the Sea, and The Playboy of the Western World came from the Aran Islands; the scene for The Shadow of the Glen and the source for The Tinker's Wedding were provided by the Wicklow essays. The only play for which Synge acknowledged a foreign source is The Well of the Saints, and this play, too, has many elements from the Aran Islands.<sup>5</sup>

One of the first critics to acknowledge Synge's authenticity was Maurice Bourgeois, who noted that foreign influences on Synge's plays, "as compared with the solid Irish substance of Synge's genius are practically negligible."<sup>6</sup> Padraic Colum, one of the two individuals to whom Synge admitted that he used a foreign model for The Well of the Saints, also vindicates Synge in this matter:

His plays were denounced as being alien to Irish life and to the Irish mind. Those who denounced them in these terms were wrong, and they were wrong because they knew nothing about the Gaelic tradition as it has been expressed in poetry-in the poetry of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>7</sup>

In recognising the importance of Gaelic tradition in Synge's work, Colum hits upon the very source of Synge's creative energies.

Synge is often reduced to being merely a scribe recording and reproducing Irish peasant-lore, because his statement in the Preface to the Playboy, that "all art is a collaboration" (IV,53), has often been interpreted with too narrow a view, and without regard to his other prefaces. It is essential to note that Synge's emphasis is constantly on the peasant's imagination. Through their imagination Synge found himself transported into a poetic realm where tradition was not simply a historical phenomenon, but a living thing. His deep attachment to the people of the Aran Islands was largely due to the fact that their way of life was "perhaps the most primitive that is left in Europe" (II,53). While he



was among the inhabitants of Aranmor he lamented the loss of richness and distinction in their way of life as a result of their increased material prosperity:

it is hard to believe that those hovels I can just see in the south [Inishmaan] are filled with people whose lives have the strange quality that is found in the oldest poetry and legend. Compared with them the falling off that has come with the increased prosperity of this island is full of discouragement. (II,116)

Colum was not the first nor the last of Synge's critics to recognise Synge's affinities with Gaelic tradition. His early biographer and critic Maurice Bourgeois noted in 1913 that "Synge's solely artistic preoccupations led him to take an interest in the modern Irishman only in so far as he typifies a survival of the dateless Irishman of the sagas."<sup>8</sup> Cornelius Weygandt, in his book on Irish drama, concurs in Bourgeois's judgement and expands the point to include Synge's proclivity for extraordinary types:

No one who knows Ireland at all would hold that Synge's plays are typical of the Irish Peasant generally, but anyone who knows Irish literature at all, and the life of the roads in Ireland, will admit that wildness and extravagance are to be found in that literature from the beginning and in that life even at this day of supposed civilization.<sup>9</sup>

The most recent major critic of Synge to recognise Synge's debt to Gaelic tradition is Alan Price, who notes that Synge, rather than merely utilizing heroic and legendary material, apart from Deirdre of the Sorrows, created a mythology of his own.<sup>10</sup> The result, as Price sees it, is that Synge created "palpable peasants having legendary qualities and fabulous nobles having earthly realism".<sup>11</sup>

The following chapters will, in a sense, be a study in mythology. Their purpose will be to examine the common history, both real and imaginary, of all of Synge's peasant characters. All of them from



Christy Mahon to Mary Byrne, share a common soil and a common tradition: they thus share many of the same problems and aspirations. This dissertation is not a source study, but a study of these problems and aspirations, not a study of the mythopoeic process at work, but a study of the world which is product of that mythopoeic process.

The sources of Synge's mythology, which are germane to the central focus of this discussion, can be reduced to two categories. First of all come his prose works, in which he records his observations of peasant Ireland as he was most struck by it. These contain a large body of mainly oral folk-lore, folk-literature, and anecdotes, many of which found their way into his plays as incidents, allusions or characters. Besides these notebooks, Synge also drew on his knowledge of Ireland's written tradition, especially that translated or recorded by Dr. Hyde, Lady Gregory, and other scholars involved in the Celtic revival. To this one must add Synge's own readings and translations from the Gaelic, in which he was quite proficient.<sup>12</sup>

The influence of two periods in Irish legend and saga is particularly evident in Synge's drama. These are the Heroic or Red Branch cycle of myth, and the Fenian or Ossianic cycle of myth. The Red Branch cycle is also known as the Ultonian cycle because it deals primarily with the heroes and heroines of Ulster, among whom Cuchulain, Conchubar, Naisi, Deirdre, and Emer are prominent.<sup>13</sup> Dr. Douglas Hyde fixed an approximate date for this cycle, which focuses largely on the heroic exploits of Cuchulain, as not long before or contemporaneous with the birth of Christ. A short summary of this cycle, as it applies to this dissertation, will be given in Chapter IV. A more complete history is readily available in Dr. Hyde's Literary History of Ireland,



or Lady Gregory's Cuchulain of Muirthemne.

The Fenian cycle of myth consists of the tales told of Conn of the Hundred Battles and his descendants, Art the Lonely, Cormac mac Art, and Cairbrè of the Liffey. It also deals to some extent with Conn's rivals, Finn mac Cumhail and his Fenian militia, who give their name to the cycle. This cycle is commonly known as the Ossianic cycle because it is supposed that Finn's son, Ossian, is the author of many of the poems of this period.<sup>14</sup> Historically, this cycle occurs about two centuries after the Red Branch cycle.

Synge's interest in the Red Branch myths was historical; from this cycle he derived Deirdre of the Sorrows and, as this dissertation will show, the inspiration for The Playboy of the Western World. His interest in the Ossianic cycle is not so easily documented since it deals with the spirit of Ossian rather than specific incidents. Ossian is fabled to have lived in Tir na n-og, an Irish Elysium, for three hundred years after the last battle of the cycle, thus surviving his contemporaries and living to meet St. Patrick and the preachers of the new gospel. He was for Synge, as he had been for many Irish poets, a symbol of the spirit of ancient Ireland, especially in his defense of the pagan way of life to Patrick, who insists that all the rest of the Fenians are in hell. Ossian finally yields control of Ireland to Patrick, but not without a great deal of banter that verges on irreverence. The spirit of this banter is evident in many of Synge's characters who know nothing about Ossian, but are a part of the tradition which he established.

Synge's interest in the Irish past does not stop at these two cycles of myth, but includes the poetry of a much later period, as



well as customs, such as the keen for the dead, which cannot be traced directly to any single cycle or period in Irish history. His interest in the past is general; the past for Synge is the "springtime of the local life" (IV, 54), which is the mainspring for his drama.

Synge did not turn to Ireland's past with a view to poetic diction only. Two of his plays, The Well of the Saints and Deirdre of the Sorrows, are set in Ireland's past; the others receive much of their vital spirit from this past. Yet Synge did not share Yeats' notions of a traditional national drama. In a letter to his friend MacKenna, Synge dissociated himself from such aspirations:

I do not believe in the possibility of "a purely fantastic, unmodern, ideal, breezy, springdayish, Cuchulainoid National Theatre."...no drama can grow out of anything other than the fundamental realities of life which are never fantastic, are neither modern nor unmodern and, as I see them, rarely spring-dayish, or breezy or Cuchulainoid.<sup>15</sup>

This realistic assessment saved Synge from ever having to lament that "Romantic Ireland's dead and gone," and allowed him to turn to Ireland's past as he knew it through the living tradition of the Irish peasantry. By distilling his observations of peasant Ireland through the alembic of his imagination, he was able to capture the spirit of old Ireland and recreate it in the characters of his plays. This spirit is what makes his plays neither "modern nor unmodern," fuses "joy" and "reality," and captures truly "what is superb and wild in reality" (IV, 54). The subtle process by which Synge fused Ireland's tradition, both written and oral, with his observations of Irish peasant life, is itself a clear example of what he meant when he stated that "all art is a collaboration" (IV, 53).

The aim of the chapters that follow is to examine the world of the Irish peasant as Synge observed it for himself, and as he felt



it in the imaginative talk of the peasants. The plays will not be considered chronologically, but thematically, and in terms of the intensity in which they deal with certain aspects of the peasant life. This life will be considered under three general headings - the basic values of the peasant in "Paganism and Christianity", the basic fears of the peasant in "The Romantic Ideal and the Despotism of Reality, and the peasants desire to escape from a harsh reality in "The Imagination as Liberator".



## CHAPTER II

### PAGANISM AND CHRISTIANITY

To Synge, the Irish peasant is a latter-day Pagan, on whose old-time heathendom the Christian faith has been artificially and superficially grafted.<sup>1</sup>

There has been a great deal of critical dispute as to Synge's attitude to the Irish clergy and to religion in general. His severest critics accuse him of anti-religious sentiment, while less vehement critics maintain that he was simply indifferent to matters of the spirit. Synge's personal sentiments about religion need not detain us here except as they are reflected in the attitudes of his characters. Critical interpretation of these attitudes too, ranges from religious parody to outright paganism. Maurice Bourgeois deplores Synge's indifference to what he calls "the most striking feature of the Irish peasant: his intense Catholic piety."<sup>2</sup> This un-Irish view of the peasant, Bourgeois concludes, is an indication of Synge's desire "to return to the relentless savagery of ancient Paganism."<sup>3</sup> Daniel Corkery is equally critical of Synge's characters, who, he claims, "have only a child's gaudy idea of the spiritual."<sup>4</sup> MacLean, in "The Hero as Playboy", detects a positive scorn for Roman Catholicism in the corpus of Synge,<sup>5</sup> while Lucas, in his study of Synge, Chekov, Yeats, and Pirandello, sees the names of God, the Virgin, and the Saints in the mouths of Synge's characters only for their picturesqueness.<sup>6</sup>

There is perhaps some truth to these claims, since Synge's characters do seem to oscillate between Christian and pagan values. By Christian values I here mean the established doctrines and rituals of the



Church of Ireland as an institution, while the term paganism refers to the pastoral life, devoid of established doctrines, especially as that life is represented by the carefree attitudes of Ossian. To assume that there was any malice on Synge's part in depicting the peasant's attraction to paganism is simply an error.<sup>7</sup> Synge's considerations were dramatic and literary, not theological. He was, besides, writing about people whom he had come to know and understand. His characters imaginatively reflect an ambiguity which Synge himself perceived. Even his most adamant critics must concede this point. Bourgeois, for example, admits that the intense faith of many peasants carries them to "an absurd excess of superstition and almost to fetishism."<sup>8</sup> He also admits that "the ancient heathendom may be said to survive in the uncontrollable temperament...of the average Irish peasant...."<sup>9</sup> Daniel Corkery admits that in almost any Irish countryside one can hear a good deal of banter that verges on blasphemy" but he tries to dismiss this as "so much implicit testimony to the strong religious consciousness of the people."<sup>10</sup> The truth to which even Synge's harshest critics must submit is that in many parts of Ireland, as in many other parts of the world, elements of paganism exist side by side with the Christian religion. Synge's characters merely give living testimony to this paradox. This does not make them any less Irish, or for that matter, any less real. Herbert Frenzel's mainly sociological study, John Millington Synge's Work as a Contribution to Irish Folklore and to the Psychology of Primitive Tribes, gives testimony to this fact:

a great part of the mind of the Irish peasant and above all of the inhabitants of these isolated islands [Aran and Blasket] is still linked to a world of magic ideas, which contrasts with his Christian belief....

The belief in fairies is firmly established in Gaelic-speaking sections, and the Celtic peasant would as soon give up his religion as his belief in the sidhe.<sup>11</sup>



The ambiguity which Frenzel noted was no less evident to Synge himself. On Aran he attended a funeral, at which the wild lamentations of a keen were followed by a simple prayer for the dead. Synge was quick to perceive the irony "in these words of atonement and Catholic belief spoken by voices that were still hoarse with the cries of pagan desperation" (II, 75).

The admixture of Christian and pagan elements which is evident in all of Synge's characters (except in Deirdre of the Sorrows) is not a unique innovation by Synge. In his book, Irish Writers: 1880-1940, Herbert Howarth states the "the nearest thing to drama in early Irish literature is the "colloquy between Ossian and Patrick", a verse drama in which the heroic pagan view of life and the Christian view are compared as Ossian yields control of Ireland to the 'man of croziers'."<sup>12</sup> Dr. Douglas Hyde speculated that this particular tale arose "from the depth of the people's sorrow when they heard...that their loved Ossian and the Fenians...were damned."<sup>13</sup> Hyde, undoubtedly is correct; Ossian, or Oisin, is not only a mythic figure but also a symbol of the vital aspect of the Celtic imagination. The "Colloquy between Ossian and Patrick" is not an aberration in Irish literature, but part of a long tradition of playful anti-clericalism that dates back possibly to the twelfth century.<sup>14</sup> Not-so-playful incidents of anti-clericalism are documented by Séan O'Suilleabhain, who notes that no less than twenty-two edicts were issued by the Synods of Ireland between 1614 and 1927 forbidding pagan practices, such as keening, to little avail.<sup>15</sup>

Synge's characters belong then to a well established tradition that mixes Christian and pagan values, sometimes opposing them and sometimes mistaking the one for the other. The least ambiguous of all Synge's plays is Deirdre of the Sorrows, in which the values are understandably



pagan. At the other end of the scale is Riders to the Sea, in which Catholic piety and ritual are combined with a pagan stoicism that is more than Celtic, and hardly in the spirit of Ossian or Cuchulain. In all the other plays, there is a mixture of pagan and Christian elements, sometimes conflicting and sometimes in harmony.

The characters of Deirdre of the Sorrows reflect little of the relentless savagery of ancient paganism to which Bourgeois refers.<sup>16</sup> Synge's basic source for his play is not known with any degree of certainty. In 1898 he translated a 1740 version of The Fate of the Children of Uisnech.<sup>17</sup> This tale is somewhat grim; Synge's version de-emphasizes the heroic gore, suggesting that he did not use the 1740 version as the basis of his drama.<sup>18</sup> He may, however, have used Dr. Hyde's version of the tale and that of Lady Gregory.<sup>19</sup> Synge modified the original tale, making **Deirdre** and Naisi choose death rather than see their love and their youth fade, instead of casting them as the passive and helpless dupes of Conchubar. As in his other plays, Synge was more interested in capturing the essence of the Celtic world than in recreating a folk-tale or a myth. The emphasis is accordingly less on external struggle and more on whole personalities.

The play, set entirely in the epic world, lacks much of the grandeur and pomp that one normally associates with the epic. Conchubar, for example, goes about with only two companions, in sharp contrast with the household of more than sixteen hundred persons with whom he is associated in MacCurtin's version. All the characters, from the Old Woman to Conchubar, speak one dialect, as if all of them, like Deirdre, had only "the birds to school [them], and the pools in the rivers..."(IV, 187). The mainspring of the tragedy in the original tale



is the prophecy that Deirdre would be the ruin of the Sons of Usna and that she would bring ruin to Ulster. The theme which Synge chose to emphasize was that of the love of Conchubar for Deirdre and her love for Naisi. Significantly this love, which brings about the tragedies of Deirdre, Conchubar and Naisi, is expressed in the terms of nature.

All the characters, except Conchubar, seem to enjoy a reciprocal sympathy with nature, which they regard pantheistically. While the gods are invoked as a blessing on greeting each other — "The gods save and keep you kindly, and stand between you and all harm forever" (IV,185) — it is in the presence of nature and in nature's terms that Naisi and Deirdre woo and wed:

By the sun and the moon and the whole earth, I wed Deirdre to Naisi....May the air bless you, and the water and the wind, the sea, and all the hours of the sun and moon. (IV,215)

Even though Lavarcham opposes Deirdre's decision to go away with Naisi, she sees it as an inevitable, natural thing:

Isn't it a hard thing you're doing, but who can help it? Birds go mating in the spring of the year, and ewes at the leaves falling, but a young girl must have her lover in all the courses of the sun and moon. (IV,213)

When Deirdre and Naisi fear that their love will pass with the coming of old age, they see this too as an inevitable thing, as inevitable as the passing of the seasons:

The dawn and evening are a little while, the winter and the summer pass quickly, and what way would you and I Naisi, have joy forever? (IV,231)

When Deirdre prepares to leave Alban for Emain Macha, she does not address her final lament to the gods, but rather apostrophizes the Woods of Cuan.

Conchubar does not have the sympathy with nature that is evident in Deirdre and Naisi and therein lies much of his tragedy. The opposition



of their natures becomes evident on their first meeting in Act I; Deirdre, bearing nuts and a bundle of twigs from the glen, is confronted by Conchubar, who has brought her "rings and jewels from Emain Macha" (IV,189).<sup>20</sup> In apposition to his offer of "a place is safe and splendid" is her preference to remain in the glen, where she is "well used to the tracks and pathways and the people..." (IV,189). Lavarcham, just as she is to recognise Deirdre's natural attraction to Naisi, recognises the impossibility of a match between Conchubar and Deirdre:

I'll tell you this night Conchubar, she's little call to mind an old woman when she has the birds to school her, and the pools in the rivers where she goes bathing in the sun. I'll tell you if you seen her that time, with her white skin, and her red lips, and the blue water and the ferns about her, you'd know maybe, and you greedy itself, it wasn't for your like she was born at all. (IV,187-189)

The basic conflict here does not arise from simply an age difference, but from a desire for a carefree, natural life, as opposed to an artificial, restrained one. This theme, and variations of it, is repeated in many of Synge's plays.

The natural and carefree pagan view of life is presented in another perspective in The Tinker's Wedding, in which there is a conflict between this view and the Christian view of life.<sup>21</sup> To see the play only in terms of this conflict, however, would be to over-simplify the play. As was noted earlier, the two elements are often mixed, so that no characters are completely and only pagan or Christian. The Priest represents institutionalized Christianity, but it must be admitted that he casts no great glory of the Order of Melchizedek. He is attracted to the pagan freedom of the tinkers, and is often "playing cards, or drinking a sup, or singing songs, until the dawn of day" (IV,13).



He has, as Alan Price states, "officially renounced his pagan instincts but he has not acquired the Christian virtues."<sup>22</sup> What keeps the priest from a carefree life like that of the tinkers is his fear that the Bishop will find out about his misdemeanors. The tinkers, on the other hand, represent the carefree pagan life, but they have some smattering of religion, enough at least to fear the Priest's Latin malediction at the end of the play. Despite their traditional way of life, they are not immune to what the priest represents.

The action of the play is precipitated by Sarah Casey, a young tinker woman who has lived with Michael Byrne and has borne him children, but who now decides that she wants to become lawfully married. Michael is reluctant to go along with this scheme because the Priest, like the peelers, represents authority and restraint. He nevertheless acquiesces to the plan for other reasons:

If I didn't marry her, she'd be walking off to Jaunting Jimmy maybe at the fall of night; and it's well yourself knows there isn't the like of her for getting money and selling songs to the men. (IV,35)

Sarah tells the priest that she desires this sanctified union because she does not want to be "growing into an old wicked heathen" (IV,21), like Michael's mother, Mary Byrne. In truth her desire for a lawful marriage is partly a whim: "the spring-time is a queer time, and it's queer thoughts maybe I do think at whiles" (IV,7). It is also clear that she has had this caprice before, as Mary's questioning indicates: "It's at marriage you're fooling again, maybe?...Is it at marriage you're fooling again?" (IV,35). The source of Sarah's whim is clear from her reply to Mary:



It is, Mary Byrne. I'll be married now in a short while; and from this day there will be no one have a right to call me a dirty name and I selling cans in Wicklow or Wexford or the city of Dublin itself. (IV,35)

Sarah's social sense also points to marriage as a desirable condition, one that will put her on a par with or even socially above "the rich tinkers do be travelling from Tibbradden to the Tara Hill" (IV,9).

But marriage is a desirable condition for the tinkers only at a price, and as Denis Johnston has observed, "in matters of bargaining they were well able to cheat the professional man, who, on his side, was quite prepared to leave them in their condition of mortal sin, if they did not produce enough cash."<sup>23</sup>

The real conflict between the Priest and the tinkers is revealed not so much in the action of the characters as in their attitudes. The main proponent of the tinker's way of life is Mary Byrne, and it is between her and the Priest that the real opposition of attitudes takes place. In its tone, their banter is very reminiscent of the "Colloquy between Ossian and Patrick".<sup>24</sup> Mary's compassion for the priest, for his hard life saying mass with his mouth dry and listening to the sins of the rural people, is very Ossianic in tone:

It'd break my heart to hear you talking and sighing the like of that, your reverence....Let you rouse up, now, if it's a poor, single man you are itself, and I'll be singing you songs unto the dawn of day. (IV,19)

This passage can be compared in tone to Ossian's view of the Christian life, as compared with that of the Celts, as he addresses himself to Patrick:

Life is a burden to you not a pleasure...Not such, not such, was our life, O cleric; not such the pleasures of Fionn and the Fianna.<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, the tone of the proselytizing St. Patrick is also



very much the tone of the Priest. His admonition to Ossian, "Listen, O gray and senseless Ossian, think upon God and bow your knee,"<sup>26</sup> is echoed in the Priest's words to Mary:

What is it I want with your songs when it'd be better for the like of you, that'll soon die, to be down on your two knees saying prayers to the Almighty God? (IV, 21)

Synge also drew upon other early Irish literature for the character of the Priest. The following passages are taken from "The Lout and his Mother", and one of them may have provided the idea for the ending of the play, as Bourgeois suggests:<sup>27</sup>

Till the Bishop is paid the "Nobis" is not read,  
And, you hag, isn't it a dear business the Ego Vos  
And sure what everyone says after all the business  
Is, that it is the mamram pego<sup>28</sup> which makes the marriage.<sup>29</sup>

Sure if you were dead tomorrow morning  
And I were to bring you to a priest tied up in a bag  
He would not read a Mass for you without hand-money,  
And as for charity, the name of it is bitter to him.<sup>30</sup>

The first passage seems to embody the priest's own mercenary tendency, with his complaints of the "pitiful small sum" that "wouldn't marry a child." While the name of charity is not bitter to him, since he sympathizes with Sarah and cuts his fee appreciably, he is not the most generous of souls, as his astonishment reveals: "Is it marry you for nothing at all?" (IV, 13).

The basic issue of this play is, of course, neither Mary's drunkenness nor the priest's stinginess. The Priest regards her as an "old flagrant heathen" simply because she enjoys life so much that she neither needs nor cares for the solace of his faith. On the other hand, the solace that his faith should bring to his office has not come, so the Priest spends much of his time at the Doctor's house, "playing cards, or drinking a sup," or in the seclusion of his rectory, behind which



there is "a stack of pint bottles...reaching the sky" (IV,19). He accepts Mary's invitation to have a drink, drawn by her genial nature and giving in to his own pagan instincts. But when he discovers that the tinkers do not so much as know a single Christian prayer, he entrenches himself in his ecclesiastical authority, determined to have nothing more to do with them. Only the prospect of saving Sarah from the pagan life of Mary Byrne reverses that decision. His aim is finally thwarted, however, by his suspicion that he is being deceived by Sarah and Michael. He refuses to marry them so they threaten to stop supplying him with "a laying pullet" for "the long days of Lent" (IV,45). He in turn threatens to go to the authorities with "a dated story of [their] villainies" (IV,45). At this point the tinkers, led by Mary, tie him up in self defense, since if the police were to come, they would believe the priest rather than the tinkers.

The play ends with neither side having given ground to the other. Mary Byrne succinctly restates the tinker's natural way of life, rejecting the swearing of oaths and all that represents institutions:

It's sick and sorry we are to tease you; but what did you want meddling with the like of us, when it's a long time we are going our own ways — father and son, and his son after him, or mother and daughter, and her own daughter again — and it's little need we ever had of going up into a church and swearing — I'm told there's swearing with it — a word no man would believe, or with drawing rings on our fingers, would be cutting our skins maybe when we'd be taking the ass from the shafts, and pulling the straps the time they'd be slippy with going around beneath the heavens in rains falling. (IV,47)

The clash, to Mary at any rate, was inevitable, and she mildly warns the Priest to refrain from proselytizing, for his own sake. The Priest is released, but only on the condition that he does swear an oath. The oath itself is symbolic of institutions, and the tinkers fully expect



that the Priest will abide by his oath, since in every other respect he seems to be a servant of institutions. He is bound to his oath, ironically, by Sarah's wedding ring; she has had enough of institutions already, and it seems more appropriate that the Priest should wear this symbol of restraint. Both sides retire; the tinkers go on their way to have "a great time drinking...with the trampers on the green of Clash" (IV,49), hurried along by the cleric who hurls Latin maledictions after them.

A somewhat similar situation occurs in The Well of the Saints, in which the Saint and the Douls typify two irreconcilable ways of life. The clash between them is precipitated only when the Saint tries to impose a distasteful reality on the Douls. As in The Tinker's Wedding, The Well of the Saints ends with the central characters leaving a hostile environment.

The Saint, in contrast to the Priest in The Tinker's Wedding, seems well satisfied with his place in life and reveals little of the latent paganism that is evident in the Priest. He is not, however, the naive innocent the Daniel Corkery has assumed.<sup>31</sup> He is not above playing on the villagers' ignorance and superstition. When Martin tries to prevent him from restoring Mary's sight for the second time, the Saint condescendingly pities him, informing him that "if it was a seeing man I heard talking to me the like of that I'd put a black curse on him would weigh down his soul till it'd be falling to hell" (III, 145). When his efforts to effect the cure a second time are foiled by Martin, he does not intervene when the villagers, in fear of "great storms or droughts" (III,149) that Martin's irreverence might bring upon them, drive the Douls from the village.



Martin and Mary Doul, on the other hand, are not as unashamedly pagan as is Mary Byrne, nor are they suspicious of the clergy as are the tinkers. Thus they have initially no fear of the Saint, and even anticipate his coming with excitement. The Douls are pagan in the way that Deirdre and Naisi are pagan — they revel in the senses. Despite their blindness, or perhaps because of it, they are very sensitive to the beauty of the world. Note, for example, Martin's obvious pleasure at listening to the Saint's bell: "It's a sweet, beautiful sound" (III, 85).

The Douls' blindness has forced them to create a world in their imagination, built partly on the recollections they have of their childhood, in which neither of them was blind. In their own world, Mary is akin to Deirdre, and Martin is like Naisi in physical beauty. When their sight is restored to them, the beautiful world in which they were living dissolves.

Martin's first words on receiving his sight are "Oh, glory be to God — (III, 93)". His disillusionment with the real world starts almost immediately, when he discovers that his wife, in terms of beauty at least, is not "the wonder of the western world" (III, 87). He and Mary consequently deride each other. Timmy the smith tries to silence them, reminding them of the presence of the Saint, but Martin, who is already suspicious of the value of the Saint's gift, says: "What is it I care for the like of him?" (III, 99). Martin's suspicions are soon borne out and he soon discovers that the reality in which he and Mary were led to believe is a sham:

Grand day, is it? Or a bad black day when I was roused up and found I was the like of little children do be listening to the stories of an old woman, and do be dreaming after in the dark night that it's in grand houses of gold they



are, with speckled horses to ride, and do be waking again, in a short while, and they destroyed with the cold, and the thatch dripping maybe, and the starved ass braying in the yard? (III,113)

Martin cannot help but suspect that in some way the Saint is also responsible for the horrible trick that has been played on him. His final action of striking the holy water from the Saint's hands, while it is sacrilegious, is nevertheless not anti-clerical, as it has been interpreted by some critics.<sup>32</sup> Very much like the tinkers' treatment of the Priest, it is done in self-defense; it is the only way in which Martin can preserve the way of life that he enjoys. The Saint, it is true, does not represent a threat as the representative of an institution, as does the Priest. He does however pose a serious threat to the carefree and sensual life as Martin and Mary have become accustomed to it. The Saint represents restraint to the Douls because he has the power to make them see, and sight would force them to toil for their bread.

The Douls' aversion to work points to the very heart of the pagan-Christian conflict, insofar as this conflict is evident in this play. The Saint, and undoubtedly the villagers to a lesser degree, typify that aspect of Christianity which praises work and self-discipline. The Douls reveal themselves to be Christians in their speech, but from their way of life it is clear that they are Christian in a pietistic rather than a moral sense. Martin and Mary typify the care-free and natural aspects of paganism, much as they are evident in Deirdre of the Sorrows. The Saint believes in mortification of the flesh and doing work for the greater glory of God. Martin, on the other hand, revels in the delights of the flesh and is mortified by the prospects of hard work and self-discipline. His reaction to



Molly Byrne's query about his attitude to the saintly life is a clear example: "if bell-ringing is a fine life, yet I'm thinking, maybe, its better I am wedded with the fine beautiful dark woman of Ballinatone" (III,87).

Martin Doul loves all that is beautiful to the senses, and so is repelled by the shabby world into which he comes when his sight is restored. He soon begins to mourn the gift of sight, recalling that "the blind don't be seeing the like of them grey clouds driving on the hill" (III,105). Significantly, when Martin and Mary are blind again and reconciled to each other, the world seems beautiful to them once more:

There's the sound of one of them twittering yellow birds do be coming in the spring-time from beyond the sea, and there'll be a fine warmth now in the sun, and a sweetness in the air, the way it'll be grand thing to be sitting here quiet and easy, smelling the things growing up, and budding from the earth. (III,131)

Despite their obviously differing attitudes to the world, Martin and the Saint have much in common. For both, the attraction to the life of the roads is strong. The Saint has travelled from "the grave of the four beautiful saints" in the west of Ireland (and Aran Islands) to the east of Ireland, doing his holy work. Martin too has the urge to travel, with Molly Byrne especially, from the east of Ireland to MacGillycuddy's Reeks, where Molly could not step but "be crushing fine flowers, and making sweet smells in the air" (III,117). The Saint, like the Douls, is quite sensitive to the beauties of nature. It seems, though, that he enjoys only the sense of sight, while the Douls enjoy all the senses except that of sight. Note, for example, that the Saint can see the glory of God in the beauties of nature, but has little or no temptation to regard them in anything other than an ascetic sense:



May the Lord who has given you sight send a little sense into your heads, the way it won't be on your two selves you'll be looking...but on the splendour of the Spirit of God, you'll see an odd time shining out through the big hills, and steep stréams falling on the sea. For if it's on the like of that you do be thinking...you'll be saying prayers and great praises, till you'll be living the way the great saints do be living, with little but old sacks, and skin covering their bones. (III,101)

The Saint's sensitivity to the beauties of nature, ascetic as it is, has led Daniel Corkery to compare him with "those old-time Gaelic saints who recorded their love of blackbird and blossoming wood in lyric strains that anticipated those of St. Francis by hundreds of years."<sup>33</sup> Corkery's comparison is a good one, especially if the Douls in turn are compared with the followers of Ossian. When the Saint tries to persuade the Douls to receive their sight again, he is like an acolyte of the proselytizing St. Patrick, reminding them that they would be able to see "the summer and the fine spring in the places where the holy men of Ireland have built up churches to the Lord" (III, 141). But like Ossian, Martin is not impressed; he has seen marvels greater than holy places:<sup>34</sup>

Isn't it finer sights ourselves has a while since and we sitting dark smelling the sweet beautiful smells do be rising in the warm nights and hearing the swift flying things racing in the air, till we'd be looking up in our own minds into a grand sky, and seeing lakes, and broadening rivers, and hills are waiting for the spade and plough. (III,141)

With the approval of the villagers, the Saint concludes that it's "little use...talking to the like of him" (III,143), and turns his attention to Mary. Martin foils this too by striking the can from the cleric's hand, and brings to a climax the conflict between two irreconcilable ways of life. He defiantly tells the Saint to "Walk on now with your worn feet, and your welted knees, and your fasting holy ways have left you with a big head on you and a thin pitiful arm" (III,149). Meanwhile he and Mary will leave, blind but happy, for the south, where



they will be "hearing a soft wind turn round the little leaves of the spring and feeling the sun, and we not tormenting our souls with the sight of the grey days, and holy men, and the dirty feet is tramping the world" (III,149).

The last two plays considered, The Well of the Saints and The Tinker's Wedding, find much of their momentum in the clash between two different codes of behavior. To some degree this is also true of The Shadow of the Glen, in which Nora Burke is attracted to the Tramp because he represents an opportunity for her to escape from a way of life that has become stifling to one that promises some excitement. The Shadow of the Glen differs from these other two plays, however, in that Nora rebels against Christian values insofar as she has come to know them in her frustrated life with a loveless old miser. This is in sharp contrast to the tinkers, who never had need of "going up into a church" (IV,47), and to the Douls, who had at first no desire to be cured permanently, but only to see "for one hour, or a minute itself" to verify for themselves that they were "the finest man, and the finest woman, of the seven counties of the east" (III,73). The tinkers and the Douls do not change their way of life, do not change their beliefs or turn their backs on them, at the end of the play, while Nora Burke does.

In terms of pagan and Christian elements, The Shadow of the Glen is more closely related to The Playboy of the Western World. The conflict in these two plays is largely internal, a matter of individual liberation. In both plays a central character is liberated from a form of tyranny, and is drawn to a less restrictive life that has many pagan overtones. Yet in neither play does the conflict center on the



two opposing ways of life. Pagan and Christian values are not directly weighed in the balance; it is rather that Synge expresses liberation in terms that could be regarded as pagan by a community that is largely dominated by Christian institutions. Indeed institutions themselves are in a sense the antithesis of the carefree life. Thus, Nora is attracted to the essentially Ossianic Tramp in spite of his pagan way of life, not because of it.<sup>35</sup> She has the perspicacity to realize that the life of the roads can be a hard life, but she is attracted to his "fine bit of talk" (III,57); besides, she has no choice but to leave, either with him, or alone. So too, Pegeen Mike is not attracted to Christy because of his reputed patricide, but because he has liberated himself from a form of tyranny, and is her opportunity to escape from a drab existence.

In The Shadow of the Glen the Tramp is the celebrant of pagan freedom, though like all the characters in the play he is ostensibly a Christian. In his personality he embodies that strange paradox mentioned earlier, a belief in a world of magic that contrasts with his Christian beliefs. This is also apparent in Nora, but to a lesser degree. Nora has not prepared Dan's body for burial because she fears the "black curse" which Dan put on her or anyone else except his own sister if they disturbed his body. The Tramp is a man who has travelled and seen many wonders, but he too is afraid of the curse:

Is it getting the curse on me you'd be, woman of the house? I wouldn't lay my hand on him for the Lough Nahanagan and it filled with gold. (III,35)

The tramp is no coward—he has spent much of his life "walking round in the long nights, and crossing the hills when the fog is on them" (III,37). But his life on the roads has taught him that there are



many things that cannot be rationally explained. He readily agrees with Nora when she states in a low voice that "it's other things than the like of you, stranger, would make a person afeard" (III,37).

When Nora asks the Tramp to remain with the body while she goes to summon help, he asks her for a needle:

Maybe if you'd a piece of a grey thread and a sharp needle- there's great safety in a needle, lady of the house- I'd be putting a little stich here and there in my coat, the time I'll be praying for his soul, and it going up naked to the saints of God. (III,41)

It becomes clear that he wanted the needle both for its utility and for its magical power, when, after he has finished his stitching, he places the needle under his coat collar (III,47). Synge had heard of this practice among the Irish peasantry from Pat Dirane on Inishmaan, who claimed that a sharp needle placed under one's coat collar would ward off harm from the fairies. On this superstition Synge notes:

Iron is a common talisman with barbarians, but in this case the idea of exquisite sharpness was probably present also, and, perhaps, some feeling for the sanctity of the instrument of toil, a folk-belief that is common in Brittany. (II,80)

Ironically, the Tramp does not fear the company of the dead man: "a man that's dead can do no hurt" (III,39). This is demonstrated by the fact that he places the needle under his collar after he knows that Dan is not dead. What the Tramp actually fears is that the fairies may do some mischief to those who are by the body, a body with a black curse on it. It is important that when the Tramp is left with the body he recites the "De Profundis," and uses the needle to mend his coat - its efficacy as a charm is lost unless it is placed under the collar. It is quite likely that the Tramp is keeping the needle at hand in case he should start hearing "queer talk" such as he heard when Patch Darcy died.



When Dan rises from his bed the second time and turns Nora out of doors, the Tramp's real Ossianic nature reveals itself. His delight in the senses is like that of the Douls, and he promises Nora a life very reminiscent of the idyllic life of Ossian:

Come long with me now, lady of the house, and it's not my blather you'll be hearing only, but you'll be hearing the herons crying out over the black lakes, and you'll be hearing the grouse, and the owls with them, and the larks and the big thrushes when the days are warm, and it's not from the like of them you'll be hearing a talk of getting old like Peggy Cavanagh, and losing the hair off you, and the light of your eyes, but it's fine songs you'll be hearing when the sun goes up, and there'll be no old fellow wheezing the like of a sick sheep close to your ear. (III,57)

He is too wise, however, to believe that anyone can lead a perfect pastoral life. At best one is forced to rationalize sometimes — "It's a wild night, God help us, but it'll pass surely (III,57)". This Celtic refusal to be dominated by the fact was also evident in the rationalizations of the Douls in respect to their 'idyllic' life:

It's a bad life for the voice, Martin Doul, though I've heard tell there isn't anything like the wet south wind does be blowing upon us, for keeping a white beautiful skin. (III,71)

The promise of the idyllic pastoral life is also a theme in The Playboy of the Western World. In this play the freedom and perfection of earlier times, typified in the romantic yearnings of Christy and Pegeen, is counterpoised with the restraint and squalor of the Mayo community, dominated by Father Reilly. Many critics have recognised The Playboy's affinities with Irish folk-lore and saga — Susan Solomont, M.J. Sidnell, Diane Bessai, Herbert Howarth, and David Krause, to mention only a few.<sup>36</sup> This aspect of the play will be more fully explored later; at this point I propose to consider only the pagan-Christian juxtaposition, as it is presented to Pegeen Mike through



Christy and Shawn. In this perspective Christy can be viewed as a kind of Ossianic bard-hero who, contrasted to the too-pious Shawn Keogh, represents to the Mayo community a new vigor and a kind of pagan freedom from the domination of Father Reilly.

The community into which Christy finds his way is a degenerate community. All of its most able bodied citizens have undoubtedly emigrated to America, the El Dorado of the Irish Peasantry (II,216), leaving behind them a very shabby crew. The best of the young men in the area is Shawn Keogh, a spineless bumpkin who has little to recommend him except his property. He is probably Pegeen's cousin, since a dispensation is needed for his imminent marriage to her. As one critic has stated, "Shawn lives in mortal fear of Father Reilly, whose name he repeats with almost hysterical frequency."<sup>37</sup> Shawn is over-pious, sees mortal sin or villainy in almost everything, and sets great importance on his own religious zeal. As the play opens, he is waiting to marry Pegeen, as a matter of a "good bargain," and is expecting his dispensation to come "from the Bishops or the Court of Rome" (IV,59). Pegeen has no such delusions, but she accepts Shawn with good humour:

It's a wonder, Shaneen, the Holy Father'd be taking notice of the likes of you, for if I was him, I wouldn't bother with this place where you'll meet none but Red Linahan, has a squint in his eye, and Patcheen is lame in his heel, or the mad Mulrannies were driven from California and they lost in their wits. We're a queer lot these times to go troubling the Holy Father on his sacred seat. (IV,59)

Pegeen's father, Michael James, is off to a wake for Kate Cassidy, from which he will return dead drunk the next day, borne home on an ass cart (IV,133). Michael invites Shawn to join the men going to the wake, but Shawn refuses, probably because Father Reilly



would have forbidden it. (In his book, Irish Wake Amusements, O'Suilleabhairn records that in 1903 the bishops of the Diocese of Ardagh and Clonmacnoise sent an order to all chapels forbidding unmarried men and women to attend wakes between sunset and sunrise-near relatives exempted-on pain of mortal sin.) Michael therefore suggests that Shawn stay with Pegeen, who is afraid to stay alone, with harvest crews, tinkers, and idle militia in the vicinity. But Shawn protests that he too is afraid, but for different reasons:

I would and welcome, Michael James; but I'm afeard of Father Reilly, and what at all would the Holy Father and the Cardinals of Rome be saying if they heard I did the like of that? (IV,63)

When Michael insists that Shawn stay to protect Pegeen, Shawn invokes Father Reilly, and Saints Joseph, Patrick, Brigid, and James to protect him! (IV,65) He finally escapes from Michael James' grasp, screaming "Leave me go, Michael James, leave me go, you old Pagan, leave me go or I'll get the curse of the priests on you, and of the scarlet-coated bishops of the courts of Rome" (IV,65). Shawn is hardly out of the door when he returns, followed shortly by Christy.

Christy, at first, does not seem like much more a daring fellow than Shawn. He is very shy and withdrawn, but after much coaxing he reveals his crime. Some dispute has arisen among critics as to whether Christy would be so readily accepted by the shebeeners. It should be noted, however, that Christy is timorous, and hardly likely to impress any of them as villain. The shebeeners can sense that there was something unintentional, if not heroic and necessary, about his act. His acceptance in Mayo is well summed up by Alan Price: After the spectacle of a lover too fearful of upsetting his priest to look after his fiancée, Pegeen and Michael are ripe to applaud any sign of enterprise, however unusual, and the appearance of a daring



young fellow who has prevailed against the authority of his father is welcome.<sup>38</sup>

The question of patricide, in this instance, becomes irrelevant. Not so, however, on his second attempt to slay his father, because the townspeople see that as a premeditated, morally reprehensible act,  
and they turn on him.<sup>39</sup>

In the company of Pegeen and with the encouragement of the local girls, Christy quickly grows in stature from a meek, unnoticed lad, to a real vital alternative to Shawn, not only in Pegeen's estimation but also in the eyes of the townspeople. In a very actual sense Christy becomes a wish-figure and a bard-hero to the people of the community. His romancing of Pegeen is very Ossianic in tone and delights her because it envisions a life grander than she would ever have known in that place, "going up winter and summer with nothing worth while to confess at all" (IV,97).

The Ossianic nature of Christy's appeal is evident in his compassion for God when he is wooing Pegeen:

It's little you'll think if my love's a poacher's or an earl's itself when you'll feel my two hands stretched around you, and I squeezing kisses on your puckered lips till I'd feel a kind of pity for the Lord God is all ages sitting lonesome in his golden chair. (IV,147)

In these lines there is a strong echo of the kind of comic compassion that Ossian felt for St. Patrick's God:

If I had known that your God was so narrow-sighted that he damned all that of people for one apple, we would have sent three horses and a mule carrying apples to God's heaven to Him.<sup>40</sup>

There is also an echo of a love refrain from the Love Songs of Connacht in Christy's words:

I had rather be beside her on a couch, ever kissing her Than to be sitting in heaven in the chair of the Trinity.<sup>41</sup>



Other elements of conventional Gaelic love poetry are evident in Christy's comparison of Pegeen to holy Brigid and in his reference to "the love-light of the star of knowledge shining from her brow" (IV,125).

Christy is largely ~~un~~aware of the sensual, basically pagan, appeal of his poetry; this is evident in the way that he innocently assumes that everyone, even the saints, must be drawn to Pegeen and feel the passion that he feels:

If the mitred bishops seen you that time, they'd be the like of the holy prophets, I'm thinking, do be straining the bars of Paradise to lay eyes on the Lady Helen of Troy, and she abroad pacing back and forward with a nose-gay in her golden shawl. (IV,149)

Pegeen's and Christy's romance is poetic, and based largely on the promise of an idyllic life like that of the legends. Susan Solomont notes that "their vision of their married life—she watching while he poaches—is a touching, yet comic allusion to the romantic life led in exile by Deirdre and Naisi," as Synge portrays it in Deirdre of the Sorrows.<sup>42</sup> Their dream is doomed to failure, however, because Pegeen, once she has seen the "dirty deed," can no longer live in the rarified atmosphere of the "gallous story." Christy, on the other hand, leaves at last with his father, to go "romancing through a romping lifetime," having become a "likely gaffer in the end of all" (IV,173). Shawn, who has always regarded Christy as "a bloddy-handed murderer" (IV,77), regards Christy's departure as the reward of virtue and a miraculous triumph for the Church, enabling him as it does to marry Pegeen at last. The box on the ear he gets from Pegeen and her final lament are testimony enough to her ultimate preference.

Synge's first play, Riders to the Sea, is his most uncharacteristic in terms of the juxtaposition of Christian and pagan elements. It



has none of the exuberance that characterizes the natural and care-free heroes of the other plays, and there are no elements that are even remotely Ossianic. While in many respects this play is basically pagan, its characters paradoxically exhibit a stronger religious consciousness than any other of Synge's characters. The play is pagan in its fatalism, but Christian in the profoundest sense in Maurya's submission to the will of God. The admixture of these disparate views of life has prompted many critics to see the play as basically Greek. Daniel Corkery sees it as "a religious play, for the heavenly powers brood upon the action, as they do in the Greek tragedies and in those of Racine, and as they do not, except at moments, in the Elizabethan."<sup>43</sup> Denis Johnston, on the other hand, sees Riders to the Sea as basically Oresteian because no moral choice is offered to the characters, and because the sea, and not the gods, is the source of the law, and there is no escape from it.<sup>44</sup> Bartley's death, in other words, does not arise from past misdeeds, his misfortune is not the consequence of a personal fault, but is predestined. A possible reason for all this confusion is that Catholicism, mysticism, and pagan superstition are so inextricably mixed that the real metaphysical basis of the play is hard to ascertain. To find this basis one must turn to the attitudes of the characters themselves, remembering that in many respects they are exactly those islanders that Synge met on Aran.

The characters in Riders to the Sea adhere to modern Christian beliefs, but they continually mix and confuse Christian belief and ritual with a more ancient heritage of magic. To Maurya there is absolutely no incongruity in seeing a revenant of Michael as she is



standing saying a prayer, and waiting to bless Bartley:

I'm after seeing him this day, and he riding and galloping. Bartley came first on the red mare, and I tried to say 'God speed' you,' but something choked the words in my throat. He went by quickly; and 'the blessing of God on you,' says he, and I could say nothing. I looked up then, and I crying, at the grey pony, and there was Michael upon it-with fine clothes on him, and new shoes on his feet. (III,19)

Maurya's words echo those of Synge's teacher on Aran, who told Synge of a woman who tried to bless one of her children, "but something choked the words in her throat" (II,51). Maurya, like the old man, would certainly have concluded that this was the work of the fairies or other dark powers. Allusions to spectres and revenants are common in Irish literature, and they seem natural to Maurya. Seeing the ghost of Michael puts her in mind of "the day Bride Dara seen the dead man with the child in his arms" (III,19).

One aspect of the Riders to the Sea that has received less critical attention than it deserves is the trust of the characters in their Christian faith. It is not like the supercilious trust of Shawn Keogh in Father Reilly, but is almost a magical trust. When Bartley leaves the cottage, he hesitates outside, waiting for his mother's blessing which may protect him from the sea. Cathleen chides Maurya for failing to give it to Bartley, betraying her belief in an almost magical potency in the blessing:

Why wouldn't you give him your blessing and he looking round in the door? Isn't it sorrow enough is on every one in this house without you sending him out with an unlucky word behind him, and a hard word in his ear? (III,11)

She then sends Maurya out to give Bartley some bread and her blessing; uncomfortable with the thought that he should leave without either:

Let you go down to the spring well and given him this and he passing. You'll see him then and the dark word will be broken, and you can say 'God speed you', the way he'll be easy in his mind. (III,13)



A further illustration of this ambiguous attitude to Catholicism is Maurya's attitude to the priest. She recognises him as a man of some authority, and relies on him to stop Bartley from making the crossing. The priest obviously has some considerable influence in the community. Nora's reply to Maurya—"he'll not stop him, mother" (III,7)—lays stress on the priest's decision, not on Bartley's. That is, if Bartley is determined to go, enough to ignore the priest's advice, Nora's reply would probably indicate that the priest has no power over Bartley.

Maurya does not have the faith in the priest's wisdom that she has in his authority. When she learns of the priest's optimistic view that "Almighty God won't leave her destitute with no son living," she replies "It's little the like of him knows of the sea" (III,21). She knows too well that the sea has a power that transcends faith, or at least makes faith irrelevant. The sea is a demanding master, taking life without warning as it provides the islanders with a livelihood. In her lament over Bartley's body, Maurya acknowledges the central position that the sea has occupied in her thoughts:

They're all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me...I'll have no call now to be up crying and praying when the winds break from the south, and you can hear the surf is in the east, and the surf is in the west, and making a great stir with the two noises, and they hitting one on the other...I won't care what way the sea is when the other women will be keening. (III,23-25)

She seems at the same time to admit the impotency of faith against the power of the sea: "It isn't that I haven't prayed for you, Bartley, to the Almighty God. It isn't that I haven't said prayers in the dark night...but it's a great rest I'll have now, and it's time surely (III, 25)". Maurya's belligerence in attributing too much power to faith distinguishes her from her daughters. The loss of her husband and all of her sons has taught Maurya what experience has yet to teach Nora and



Cathleen—that prayers and the optimism of a young priest have little power against the relentless sea. Her faith is a far profounder faith, one that gives her tragic dignity in her submission to God's will: "No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied" (III,27).

The preceding discussion has been an attempt to elucidate some of the conflicts in values that are evident in Synge's characters. It has not been exhaustive; The Playboy of the Western World or Riders to the Sea alone could provide sufficient material for discussion of this sort. But since the scope of this discussion is the world of all of Synge's peasants, brevity in some instances may perhaps be excused in deference to the over-all perspective of this dissertation.



## CHAPTER III

### THE ROMANTIC IDEAL AND THE DESPOTISM OF REALITY

Isn't it a small thing is foretold about the ruin of ourselves, Naisi, when all men have age coming and great ruin in the end. (IV,211)

In the preceding chapter, two opposing codes of behavior and systems of values were juxtaposed in order to illuminate the alternate modes of life which present themselves to the Irish peasant as Synge knew him. Not inconsistent with this view, these alternate ways of life—Paganism and Christianity, unrestricted freedom and institutionalized life—can be seen as the ideal and the actual aspects of everyday life. The life of pagan freedom and natural virtue is an ideal state but it has inherent limitations as a permanent way of life for gregarious creatures. Man's gregarious nature facilitates the establishment of institutions, which are an attempt to overcome the limitations of the completely unrestrained life. These institutions, Christianity among them, are therefore part of the real world as the Irish peasant encounters it. The actual world is not totally represented by Christianity or any other institution, but disenchantment with the reality that one is forced to live is often accompanied by disenchantment with or indifference to the institutions which are a part of it. Paganism, especially that paganism represented by Ossian, represents an ideal world. Ossian, it was noted earlier, is not simply a symbol of Paganism, but is also a symbol for the vital aspect of the Celtic imagination; as such he represents an escape from an oppressive reality. The opposition between Pagan and Christian elements in Irish life is therefore more than the



clash between the modern and the ancient world; it is the clash also of a romanticized vision of life with a despotic reality.

Synge's peasants are not, as Bourgeois suggested, latter-day pagans onto whom Christianity has been "artificially and superficially grafted."<sup>1</sup> Like the peasants of any other culture they tend to romanticize the life of an earlier day, and they are attracted to that life only as they have re-created it in their imagination. In their attraction to Ossian, Synge's peasants are children of nature; their dreams are not of a political Utopia or of a new Jerusalem, but of a world full of natural beauty in which they can find ease and happiness.<sup>2</sup> This is not to suggest that Synge romanticized his peasants by exaggerating their attraction to the pastoral, Ossianic life. His peasant figures bear little resemblance to the swains of conventional pastoral poetry, but like those of Crabbe and Hardy they have both ugliness and beauty, laughter and desolation.

Like Nature itself, Synge's peasants are both romantic and realistic in their approach to life. Nora Burke, for example, is both attracted and repelled by the life of the roads. These qualities are evident in the lives of the Aran Islanders, as Synge recorded them. In many ways their lives seemed romantic to Synge; he was particularly impressed with their natural simplicity and virtue:

the general simplicity of their lives has given them many points of physical perfection. Their way of life has never been acted on by anything much more artificial than the nests and burrows of the creatures that live round them, and they seem in a certain sense to approach more nearly to the finer types of our aristocracies....Tribes of the same natural development are, perhaps, frequent in half-civilised countries, but here a touch of the refinement of old societies is blended, with singular effect, among the qualities of the wild animal. (II, 66)

There is, for example, as unsophisticated virtue in their regard for



attention to a vital aspect of their world, the harshness of reality. Herbert Howarth has remarked of The Playboy of the Western World that it "ended the interpretation of peasant life in terms of crooning and faery and supplanted these with violence and gusto."<sup>5</sup> This is true not only of the Playboy but of many of Synge's plays. The jokes of the villagers at the expense of the blind Douls are cruel; so too is the box on the ear by which Michael Byrne originally persuaded Sarah Casey to follow him, and so too is the way in which Nora is turned out of doors by her husband, Dan.

Brutality is not simply a matter of physical or mental violence. The natural world too can be cruel. Una Ellis-Fermor has stated that in Synge's drama, "nature is not merely a background in harmony with the play," but is "an actor recognised by the other human actors."<sup>6</sup> In The Well of the Saints and Deirdre of the Sorrows the natural world is a familiar companion; in Riders to the Sea and The Shadow of the Glen the natural world is an active agent which creates moods and draws down fates.<sup>7</sup> In Riders to the Sea the sea and the wind are the real antagonists and seem at times to be malicious. Synge sensed this on the Aran Islands when he felt that he was speaking "with men who were under a judgement of death" (II,162). The importance of the natural world is evident in all of Synge's plays, both directly and insofar as it is the cause of the greatest fears of Synge's peasants-loneliness, the fading of beauty and love, old age and death.

The most characteristic feature of the Irish peasant as Synge portrays him is his sense of loneliness and desolation. In the Wicklow essays Synge emphasized the desolation in which the people lived. Life was more of a nightmare than a dream to them; the only dream



the Connaught man who killed his father:

This impulse to protect the criminal is universal in the west. It seems partly due to the association between justice and the hated English jurisdiction, but more directly to the primitive feeling of these people, who are never criminals yet always capable of crime, that a man will not do wrong unless he is under the influence of a passion which is as irresponsible as a storm on the sea. (II, 95)

Besides being an example of their natural virtue, this case also points up two other aspects of the peasants' lives. First, it points up their own capacity for crime, as even the meek Christy Mahon makes clear, and secondly, it reveals their disenchantment with an institution which they associate with an oppressive reality, dramatized by the villagers who shelter Christy from the searching law.<sup>3</sup> Synge defends the islanders for harbouring the Connaught man, as he was later called upon to defend The Playboy, but he had no romantic illusions about these peasants. He was also acutely aware of their imperfections, especially of the callousness and brutality of which they were capable. One of the islanders, for example, suggested to him that the murderer of a president or a king should be "three weeks dying" (II, 163). He also observed that these people had no feeling for the sufferings of animals, as was evident in their treatment of donkeys, and their habit of plucking the feathers from live ducks and geese. In West Kerry he met two young men who had "great sport every Friday and Saturday, seeing the old women howling in the stations" (II, 269), as their children left home for Dublin or America.

All these qualities, some romantic, some brutally realistic, are reflected in the peasant figures of Synge's drama, and have inspired one critic to regard Synge's drama as a "juxtaposition of exaltation and brutality."<sup>4</sup> To regard brutality as one of the basic elements of Synge's peasant world is perhaps extreme, but it does draw



which most of them could entertain against the loneliness of their lives was the hope of emigrating to America, which, besides the Union and the Madhouse, was one of the "three shadowy countries that are never forgotten in Wicklow" (II,216). This sense of isolation and desolation was particularly evident to Synge among the Aran Islanders. Synge ends his description of a teenage girl in this manner:

At one moment she is a simple peasant, at another she seems to be looking out at the world with a sense of prehistoric disillusion and to sum up in the expression of her grey-blue eyes the whole external despondency of the clouds and sea. (II,114)

Changing the girl's age only, how perfectly this description characterizes Maurya in Riders to the Sea.

Maurya is the most desolate of all Synge's characters. Her loneliness is at first very personal and is largely the product of her own self-pity. She has lost most of her men-folk to the sea, one of her sons is missing, and the last of her sons is determined to go to the mainland in spite of the possibility of adverse weather. She cannot stop Bartley, so she indulges in self-pity: "Isn't it a hard and cruel man won't hear a word from an old woman, and she holding him from the sea" (III,11). It is this self-pity which has largely isolated her from her family. Bartley, for example, often ignores his mother and directs most of his instructions to Cathleen and Nora. In addition to this, Maurya is isolated from her family by her view of the sea; to her it is a threat, while to Bartley and the other young men in the community it is an alluring though dangerous source of livelihood. The disparity is clear in Cathleen's reply to her mother when Maurya laments her lack of control over Bartley: "It's the life of a young man to be going on the sea, and who would listen to an old woman with one thing and she saying it over?" (III,11).



After her vision of Michael, Maurya's attitude changes. She then foresees Bartley's death and realizes that she will be more alone than ever. As she had said earlier to Bartley, "what is the price of a thousand horses against a son where there is one son only?" (III,9). Her loneliness and desolation will come to represent the loneliness of all mothers who outlive their sons. Thus her final prayer is both personal and universal:

May the Almighty God have mercy on Bartley's soul, and on Michael's soul, and on the souls of Sheamus and Patch, and Stephen and Shawn....and may He have mercy on my soul, Nora, and on the soul of everyone is left living in the world. (III,27)

Her acceptance of Bartley's death is not as passive as it has often been regarded. By universalizing her prayer she affirms the world in which human life is only an episode.<sup>8</sup>

Maurya's lament at the end of the play is not only an elegy for her lost husband and sons, but for all suffering mankind. Maurya becomes a generalised spokesman for the whole community, which is bound together by its common servitude to the sea, and so she gathers to herself the grief of all mothers who have lost their sons or husbands.

The fulfilment of Maurya's foreknowledge of Bartley's death is the central issue in Riders to the Sea. Bartley is fated; he is under a judgement of death as are all the men in the community. Maurya, old and broken by the deaths of all her other men-folk, knows this and cannot grieve for Bartley alone. She is past grief for one son, or for any single individual. Her grief for Bartley is generalized sorrow for the whole community, where "the young men do be leaving things behind for them that do be old" (III,13). Significantly, just before Bartley's body is brought in, Maurya is reciting a litany of all the men she has lost to the sea. Just as she is describing how Patch's



body was brought in on a piece of red sail, preceded by women coming in silently and crossing themselves, this action begins again. The entire scene seems like a ritual, in which Maurya's words dictate the action. In this scene Bartley's death takes on a new significance. When his body is borne in exactly as was his brother's years earlier, we realise that his death is symbolic of an often repeated occurrence in the community. In this respect the tragedy of Riders to the Sea does surpass character. Maurya, and the keening women, and the dead body become disembodied personalities re-enacting a universal tragedy. The whole community mourns Maurya's loss, but no one will ever be able to alleviate her sense of desolation. If her statement that "no man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied" (III,27) is accepted, one must also accept that loneliness and desolation are inherent in man's condition.

The loneliness of Riders to the Sea is both physical and mental; the physical isolation of the community is paralleled by the loneliness of the spirit, the intense feeling of desolation that Maurya reflects. This is true of most of Synge's plays, the possible exceptions being The Well of the Saints and The Tinker's Wedding. In all the other plays, the fears of the characters, whether of old age, isolation, or death, are either induced by the physical isolation of the characters, or are intensified by the natural world. In The Playboy of the Western World Pegeen's loneliness is largely a consequence of the desolation of the Mayo village, from which most of the able-bodied men seem to have departed. In Deirdre of the Sorrows, on the other hand, Deirdre's fear of old age and the fading of love reawakens her sense of isolation and intensifies her desire to return to Ireland.



In The Shadow of the Glen the relationship between physical and spiritual desolation is more evident than in any other of Synge's plays except Riders to the Sea. The plot for this play was suggested to Synge by a tale he heard from an old man on Aran, but the description of the mists and the episode of Patch Darcy being eaten by crows come from "Glencree" and "The Oppression of the Hills," respectively. It is from these two latter works that the play receives its atmosphere.

By itself the story as Synge heard it is only a rude folk-tale; Synge's drama is much more than a folk-tale. It is no longer a fabliau of a vibrant Young Wife married to a heartless Old Man, but the tragedy of Nora Burke, condemned to a life of misery with Dan Burke, a crusty old farmer who has little regard for his wife's sensitive spirit. In transforming the folk-tale into a drama, Synge shifts the emphasis from the guilty lovers, and focuses instead on Nora and the Tramp who delivers her from a life of loneliness.

The title of the play, The Shadow of the Glen, is significant in itself, for the glen shares the role of antagonist with Dan Burke. Nora is lonely for lack of company; she is too vibrant a personality to have much in common with Dan. Her marriage to Dan, like that proposed between Pegeen and Shawn, was a matter of a "good bargain," rather than a matter of elective affinity. But Nora is also lonely simply as a consequence of the isolation of the cottage. The isolation and desolation of the glen is oppressive, so much so that Nora begins to rue the day she ever concluded her "bargain" with Dan:

I do be thinking in the long nights it was a big fool I was that time, Michael Dara, for what good is a bit of a farm with cows on it, and sheep on the back hills, when you do be sitting, looking out from a door the like of that door, and seeing nothing but the mists rolling down the bog, and the mists again, and they rolling up the bog, and



hearing nothing but the wind crying out in the bits of broken trees were left from the great storm, and the streams roaring with the rain? (III,49)

Michael is uneasy at this sort of talk, and regards it as slightly mad, "the like of that talk you do hear from men, and they after being a great while on the back hills" (III,49). Michael has perhaps some reason to be uneasy. In "The Oppression of the Hills," which might well serve as an alternate title to this play, Synge notes the effect of the locality on the people:

This peculiar climate, acting on a population that is already lonely and dwindling, has caused or increased a tendency to nervous depression among the people, and every degree of sadness, from that of the man who is merely mournful to that of the man who has spent half his life in the mad-house, is common among these hills. (II,209)

Everyone in The Shadow of the Glen is acutely aware of the isolation of the cabin. The Tramp is surprised that Nora is not afraid of him, assuming that any woman living in so forlorn and isolated a place would have reason to fear him:

I was thinking, and I coming through the door, that it's many a lone woman would be afeared of the like of me in the dark night, in a place wouldn't be as lonesome as this place, where there aren't two living souls would see the little light you have shining from the glass. (III,37)

Michael, when he fears that Nora may not marry him after all, attributes her recalcitrance to lonesomeness from "living a long time with an old man," but he assures her that from now on she can enjoy a "fine life... with a young man" (III,53). Dan Burke, too, is aware of loneliness, but he is too callous to admit that Nora's attentions to other men may stem from this only. He would rather believe that she is unfaithful, and sends her out to walk the "lonesome roads" (III,55).

The desolation of the glen has another effect on Nora Burke, as destructive as her intense loneliness. As she reflects upon her



essentially solitary life, she compares her fate to those of Mary Brien and Peggy Cavanagh. Mary at least has children and is leading a fruitful life, while she simply sits and watches Dan get older and more senile. The thought of old age and senility singularly impresses her, so that she begins to wonder whether or not she cares to marry Michael at all:

Why would I marry you, Mike Dara? You'll be getting old, and I'll be getting old, and in a little while, I'm telling you, you'll be sitting up in your bed-the way himself was sitting-with a shake in your face, and your teeth falling, and the white hair sticking out round you like an old bush where sheep do be leaping a gap. (III,51)

Ironically, Dan rises in his bed exactly as Nora has described him, and condemns her to the change of scenery she so earnestly desires. But the Tramp's "fine bit of talk" assuages Nora's fear of uncomely old age by reassuring her that the herons, the larks, and the thrushes will never remind her "of getting old like Peggy Cavanagh" (III,57). Nora realizes that the life of the roads will be difficult, but the Tramp has a romantic charm about him. While he cannot promise her the security that she desires, he has at least imaginatively liberated her from her two greatest fears, loneliness and old age.

Like Nora, Deirdre is also obsessed with "the relentless stride of time, the escapeless advance of old age."<sup>9</sup> As in Riders to the Sea and The Shadow of the Glen, nature plays a vital role as antagonist in Deirdre of the Sorrows, only in this instance its effect is more indirect. Deirdre is not victimized directly by the natural world as is Maurya, nor does the world around her oppress her as the glen does to Nora. She fears, rather, that like all natural things she will grow old and lose her natural beauty. Deirdre is fated because she cannot escape from Nature's own dictum that earthly beauty must decay and



die. This is a difficult realization for Deirdre, who, in Naisi's company, has come to regard the natural world as a familiar companion.

Deirdre and Naisi were wed and lived by Nature's terms, so it is not surprising that she should associate love with Nature. Her fear of her fading beauty and decaying youth is thus accompanied by the conviction that her love for Naisi, and his for her, will pass:

The dawn and the evening are a little while, the winter and the summer pass quickly, and what way would you and I Naisi, have joy forever? (IV,231)

Deirdre's fear of the advance of old age can in many respects be compared to that of Nora Burke. Nora longs for a change of scenery because she fears growing old and solitary with Michael, watching him age as she had watched Dan. The same is true of Deirdre, and is part of her rationale for returning to Emain Macha to certain death:

It's this hour we're between the daytime and a night where there is sleep forever, and isn't it a better thing to be following on to a near death, than to be bending the head down, and dragging with the feet, and seeing one day, a blight showing upon love where it is sweet and tender? (IV,233)

The comparison with Nora is not invalidated by Deirdre's knowledge of the fate which awaits her; her fear of old age can be translated into a reawakened sense of loneliness and desolation. As she was once a fugitive from Conchubar she is now a fugitive from old age. To remain in Alban is now impossible because she realizes that as she and Naisi grow too old to enjoy the splendors of nature around them, their sense of isolation will grow stronger. She and Naisi both desire to return to their native soil but they fear Conchubar. Fergus knows this, and duped by false promises from Conchubar, he plays on their awakened sense of isolation to persuade them to return with him:

when I was a young man we'd have given a lifetime to be in Ireland a score of weeks, and to this day the old men have



nothing so heavy as knowing it's in a short while they'll lose the high skies are over Ireland, and the lonesome mornings with birds crying on the bogs. Let you come this day for there's no place but Ireland where the Gael can have peace always. (IV,225)

Fergus is successful; Deirdre finally admits that "it's a lonesome thing to be away from Ireland always," and that "It's in this place we'd be lonesome in the end" (IV,237).

The parallel between Deridre and Nora Burke can be carried even further. Nora's fear of old age is largely influenced by having seen it in others, in Dan, and in Peggy Cavanagh, who has "no teeth in her mouth, and no sense, and no more hair than you'd see on a bit of a hill and they after burning the furze from it" (III,51). Deirdre too has been impressed by the sight of old age in others. Conchubar, who is not senile, is yet very old in Deirdre's eyes. She has no desire to be his queen partly because of the disparity that exists between their ways of life and partly because of the years that separate them:

A girl born, the way I'm born, is more likely to wish for a mate who'd be her likeness...a man with his hair like the raven maybe and his skin like the snow and his lips like blood spilt on it. (IV,191)

This is a sharp contrast with Conchubar, whom Owen describes as an old man, with "a swelling belly, and eyes falling down from his shining crown" (IV,233).

The image of old age that most impresses Deirdre is not that of Conchubar, however, but that of Lavarcham. Lavarcham is about fifty when Deirdre leaves Slieve Fuadh; she is thus only a few years short of sixty when Deirdre sees her again in Alban. If Deirdre does not notice the change, it is well impressed upon her by Owen, who reminds her that she and Naisi may one day be senile:



It's Naisi, Naisi is it? Then I tell you you'll have great sport one day seeing Naisi getting a harshness in his two sheep's eyes and he looking on yourself. Would you credit it, my father used to be in the broom and heather kissing Lavarcham, with a little bird chirping out above their heads, and now she'd scare a raven from a carcass on a hill. Queens get old Deirdre, with their white and long arms going from them, and their backs hooping. I tell you it's a poor thing to see a queen's nose reaching down to scrape her chin. (IV,233-225).

Owen's words have a discomforting ring of truth to them; Lavarcham herself has told Deirdre that "there's little hurt getting old, saving when you're looking back" (IV,219). Deirdre has no desire to look back; she feels that in seven years she has had more than an ordinary share of happiness, and she is willing to sacrifice her life rather than see that happiness become a memory only. Naisi shares this sentiment and agrees that they must return to Ireland: "We'll go surely, in place of keeping a watch on a love had no match and it wasting away" (IV,233).

Deirdre and Naisi are not the only figures in this play who are plagued by thoughts of old age and loneliness. Owen, driven to madness by his desire for Deirdre, considers it "a poor thing to be so lonesome you'd squeeze kisses on a cur dog's nose" (IV,233). Conchubar is also lonesome because of Deirdre, and his desire for her initiates the action of this play. Conchubar is not simply a dark force that crushes opposition, but an individual who grows in self-awareness. Thus Deirdre's tragedy is also his tragedy. He knows that he is growing old and this intensifies his desire to have Deirdre for his queen. His desire, it must be added, does not result solely from the feeling that what was rightfully his was stolen from him, but is prompted also by the notion that Deirdre can be a fit companion for him in his loneliness; there is also an element of desire for that



which cannot be easily obtained:

it's long enough I am above in my Dun stretching east and west without a comrade, and I more needy maybe than the thieves of Meath....You think I'm old and wise, but I tell you the wise know the old must die, and they'll leave no chance for a thing slipping from them, they're set their blood to win. (IV,243)

At no time, however, does Conchubar ever speak of love for Deirdre.

The lesson which he must tragically learn is that "a place is safe and splendid" (IV,193) is not enough without mutual love, such as that which exists between Deirdre and Naisi.. The greatness of Conchubar's tragedy becomes apparent in his final words to Lavarcham, which he utters with the voice of an old man: "Take me with you, I'm hard set to see the way before me" (Iv,269). There is a tragic intensity in these words that rivals that of Maurya's final words, and they evoke all the images of loneliness, desolation, and old age.

The loneliness of an old man and his desire for the companionship of a young girl also occurs as a secondary theme in The Well of the Saints. When Martin Doul is separated from Mary, he is essentially isolated in a world which he regards as hostile. His desire for companionship is very strong, especially for that of Molly Byrne, but his wistful glances at Mary every time she passes the smithy indicate that he still cares even for her company. He is too proud to reconcile himself with Mary, however, because he feels that Molly is a fitter object for his romantic yearnings. But Molly reminds him that he is growing old, a point which, despondingly, he must admit:

It's not a lie you're telling maybe, for it's long years I'm after losing from the world, feeling love, and talking love, with the old woman, and I fooled the whole while with the lies of Timmy the smith. (III,115)

Nevertheless he is not willing to admit that he is senile or ugly, and he



feels that if his wife left him it was because of her consciousness of her own ugliness. This conclusion intrigues Molly, and Martin seizes the moment to impress on her the disparity between her youth and beauty and Mary's age; his reason is, of course, to provide her with a rationale for his attention to her:

I'm thinking by the mercy of God it's few sees anything but them is blind for a space. It's few sees the old women rotting for the grave, and it's few sees the like of yourself, though it's shining you are, like a high lamp, would drag in the ships out of the sea. (III,117)

His words have an unconscious irony; the "high lamp" to which he refers may be an allusion to the false lamps which wreckers and smugglers used to lure the ships which they wished to plunder onto the rocks.<sup>10</sup> For Martin, Molly is indeed a false lantern. He admits to her that he often dreamed of her voice when he was blind. Like a ship on a dark sea steering by a signal lamp, Martin directs much of his thought to Molly when he is blind, only to find himself on the rocks of reality when Molly rejects him. As Timmy drives him off, Martin starts to lose his sight again and turns to Mary who is passing by, asking her "Is it the darkness of thunder is coming, Mary Doul? Do you see me clearly with your eyes?" (III,119). Mary also turns him away; Martin is now truly like a ship on a dark sea, with no guiding light.

When both Martin and Mary have lost their sight again completely, their foremost thoughts are of loneliness. For Mary "short days will be long days" (III,125) as she tries to fend for herself. Martin's thoughts are also of loneliness; he realizes at last that he needs Mary to avoid the loneliness of blindness:

It's lonesome I'll be from this day, and if living people is a bad lot, yet Mary Doul herself, and she a dirty,



wrinkled-looking hag, was better maybe to be sitting along with than no one at all. I'll be getting my death now, I'm thinking, sitting alone in the cold air, hearing the night coming, and the blackbirds flying round in the briars crying to themselves, the time you'll hear one cart getting off a long way to the east, and another cart getting off a long way in the west, and a dog barking maybe, and a little wind turning the sticks. (III,125-127)

Alone, each of them faces a life of misery and desolation. They are quickly reconciled, for together they can return to their dreams of beauty which make even the thought of old age and white hairs a joy.

The Doul's find a consolation to their rather hard life in each other's companionship. They would rather put up with each other's querulous nature than face life alone. This attitude is evident in another of Synge's peasant figures, Mary Byrne in The Tinker's Wedding. Mary Byrne is not blind, but she must put up with the whimsical and sometimes querulous nature of Sarah Casey, who holds sway over Mary's son, Michael. But while Mary is imaginative, she cannot retreat from her hard life by creating a beautiful dream-world. At best she has grand stories to tell, "of the great queens of Ireland with white necks on them the like of Sarah Casey" (IV,25), to pass away the lonesome hours.

Mary is old, and she becomes almost painfully aware of this whenever she is left alone:

It's gone they are, and I with my feet that weak under me you'd knock me down with a rush, and my head with a noise in it the like of what you'd hear in a stream and it running between two rocks and rain falling. What good am I this night, God help me? What good are the grand stories I have when it's few would listen to an old woman... (IV,25-27)

In moments like these, though not exclusively at such moments, she tries to console herself with a pint of porter, which she obtains by selling the tin cans that Michael makes, though she is well aware of the consequences:



Jemmy Neill's a decent lad; and he'll give me a good drop for the can; and maybe if I keep near the peelers tomorrow for the first bit of the fair, herself won't strike me at all; and if she does itself, what's a little stroke on your head besides sitting lonesome on a fine night, hearing the dogs barking, and the bats squeaking, and you saying over, it's a short while only till you die. (IV,27)

Mary accepts the hard tinker's life and occasional ill-usage as a matter of course; anything is better than the loneliness of old age.

Sarah Casey's desire to get married can also be attributed in a sense, to loneliness. It was pointed out earlier that Sarah sees marriage as a desirable social condition. It is true, therefore, that she desires marriage, in part at least, in order to end her separation from respectable society. She explains her motive to Mary:

I'll be married now in a short while; and from this day there will no one have a right to call me a dirty name and I selling cans in Wicklow or Wexford or the city of Dublin itself. (IV,35)

Mary must concede that Sarah has every right to a decent marriage, although she fears that this might leave herself destitute; she therefore cunningly switches the argument to the question of old age, suggesting that respectable society is more prone to the ravages of sickness and old age:

It's as good a right you have surely, Sarah Casey, but what good will it do? Is it putting that ring on your finger will keep you from getting an aged woman and losing the fine face you have, or be easing your pains, when it's the grand ladies do be married in silk dresses, with rings of gold, that do pass any woman with their share of torment in the hour of birth, and do be paying the doctors in the city of Dublin a great price at that time, the like of what you'd pay for a good ass and a cart? (IV,37)

Sarah is unnerved by this, and must finally retreat to regarding the price for the ceremony as a good bargain and standing by it. Ironically, the tin can which has already been paid as the price of Mary's consolation in her loneliness will be instrumental, distinguished by its



absence, in saving Sarah from separation from her own people, rather than from respectable society.

Sarah's desire to get married is based on a very idealized conception of marriage. While it might in fact place her on a social level above that of the "rich tinkers do be travelling from Tibradden to the Tara Hill" (IV,9), it would not put her on a social level with respectable folk, who would still regard her as a tinker. It is even doubtful that she would win esteem from the tinkers. Her haste to get married before anyone knows of it, as Alan Price has remarked, indicates that she knows that she is doing something that other tinkers would consider unnatural.<sup>11</sup>

Sarah's isolation is thus superficial; it is based on social distinctions which in all likelihood she could never surmount, and which she soon forgets as she and the others bind and gag the priest. Mary's query, "Is it at marriage you're fooling again?" (IV,35), suggests that Sarah has had this caprice before, and it is quite likely that she needed a stronger, more viable excuse this time. The idea of marriage is not a heart-felt conviction at any rate; she is deterred too easily for that. As she finally tells the priest, "It'll be a long day till I go making talk of marriage or the like of that" (IV,49).

Loneliness, leading to a desire for marriage, is also a motif in The Playboy of the Western World. Pegeen Mike, the heroine of the piece, is lonely in both a physical and a spiritual sense. Her father's shebeen is in a small isolated Mayo community, and by road there is "not a decent house within four miles" of it (IV,67). The isolation of the community itself is largely responsible for Pegeen's loneliness, since she has little companionship except that of Shawn Keogh, to



whom she is betrothed. Shawn, however, can offer Pegeen only the companionship of his physical presence; he cannot match Pegeen's spirit, and in fact cannot even comprehend her lament for the lack of spirit in the community. As far as he is concerned, "we're as good this place as another, maybe, and as good these times as we were for ever" (IV,59). Pegeen reacts to this with scorn, recalling the days of Daneen Sullivan, who "knocked the eye from a peeler," and Marcus Quin, who had a "great warrant to tell stories of holy Ireland" (IV,59). Compared to men like these, Shawn is a "good bargain" to Pegeen, but little more.

Pegeen first reveals her loneliness when Shawn asks her if her father is going off to Kate Cassidy's wake:

He is surely, and leaving me lonesome on the scruff of the hill. Isn't it long the nights are now, Shawn Keogh, to be leaving a poor girl with her own self counting the hours to the dawn of day? (IV,59)

Unfortunately Shawn can do little to assuage Pegeen's loneliness; he is so afraid of Father Reilly that he would not dare stay with Pegeen alone for the whole evening, even though Pegeen's father suggests it. Ironically, even if Shawn were not afraid of Father Reilly, it is unlikely that he could offer Pegeen any real protection from strangers; for all his piety, he was too cowardly to act the Good Samaritan when he heard Christy, unknown to him, moaning in the ditch. "It was," he tells Pegeen, "a dark lonesome place to be hearing the like of him" (IV, 61).

Into this little world comes Christy Mahon, a meek lad who describes himself as "a poor orphaned traveller, has a prison behind him, and hanging before, and hell's gap gaping below" (IV,71). Christy too is lonesome; in his own parish he was given no heed by any, "saving only the dumb beasts of the field" (IV,83). He tells Pegeen further that



he "was lonesome all times and born lonesome...as the moon of dawn" (IV, 111). Once Christy is accepted by the community and establishes a rapport with Pegeen Mike, he is delighted: for the first time in his life he faces the prospect of happiness, which means to him that he will "not [be] lonesome from this mortal day" (IV,113). For Pegeen the prospect is equally delightful: Christy represents to her all the spirit and charm that she finds lacking in the rest of the community.

Unfortunately, Christy's and Pegeen's hopes do not materialize. Christy has fallen in love with his own romancing, and Pegeen has fallen in love with a romantic vision of Christy which she has created for herself. When the reality underneath is exposed, Pegeen forces Christy to repudiate the community which believed only in his lie, a lie which that community helped to create. Christy suspects that he is doomed to a lonely life once more, but, he concludes, it is the lesser of two evils:

Shut your yelling, for if you're after making a mighty man of me this day by the power of a lie, you're setting me now to think if it's a poor thing to be lonesome, it's worse maybe go mixing with the fools of earth. (IV,165)

But Christy will not be lonely; he has awakened a sense of pride in his father and a sense of confidence in himself. He will go "romancing through a romping lifetime from this hour to the dawning of the judgement day," leaving Pegeen to grieve alone for "the only playboy of the western world" (IV,173).

The "life-lie" to which Christy succumbs is not an unusual phenomenon among Synge's peasant figures. The Douls, for example, create a world of beautiful dreams to which they are able to retreat even after they have been jolted by the reality. Nora Burke succumbs to the romantic charm of the Tramp, who cannot end her loneliness once for all or



prevent her from aging, but who can at least direct her attention to more delightful thoughts. But all of Synge's peasants cannot escape from reality to go "romancing through a romping lifetime" (IV,173). Sarah Casey must finally return to her traditional way of life an unmarried woman; Maurya is ultimately forced to except a hard reality that even her deep faith cannot explain, while Deirdre ultimately chooses death in preference to a reality that is "pitiful for want of pity" (IV,261). Yet one thing ties together most of Synge's peasant characters, and that is their ability to escape from reality, for however short a time, through the inventions of their imagination. This common bond will be the central focus of the next chapter.



## CHAPTER IV

### THE IMAGINATION AS LIBERATOR

The Irish peasant, because of the ardour of his unsatisfied cravings, finds his most joyful moods, his most poignant griefs, in the life beyond actuality, the life of the imagination which, in an Irish mind, is apt to become the more real of the two.<sup>1</sup>

Bearing in mind the discussion of the previous chapter, one might say that Synge's plays do not deal so much with actions as with reactions. Most of his peasant figures exhibit a nervous energy that directs itself against the despotism of reality, against old age, the fading of beauty, or the solitary, lonely life. The product of this nervous energy is a form of "life-lie", a fantasy in which the character indulges in order to escape from an unpleasant reality. It must be noted, however, that fantasy in this sense does not always imply something spring-dayish or fantastical; it can also mean any rationalization or projection in which the imagination is cast in the role of liberator.

The extent to which Synge's peasants indulge in the life of the imagination varies, depending not only on the personality in question, but also on the general tenor of the play in which they appear. It is impossible, for example, to consider the role of the imagination in Riders to the Sea in the same light as one could consider it in The Playboy of the Western World. One is realistic; the other is, as Synge called it, an extravaganza. Yet even these two plays have a common ground; in both, Maurice Bourgeois notes, mentally anticipated emotions are more vivid than actual feelings:

Maurya feels more grief in her foreknowledge of Bartley's death than when his body is actually brought in; the two lovers in the Playboy



spend their time and passion not in making love, but in describing the delightful way in which they will make love in the future.<sup>2</sup>

The role of the imagination as liberator is particularly evident in two of Synge's plays, The Well of the Saints and The Playboy of the Western World. These two plays will be the central focus of this chapter because they typify the two principal ways in which the imagination has redemptive value in Synge's plays. In The Well of the Saints, the Douls are redeemed by their ability to create an imaginative alternative to reality. They have a choice between two worlds, and they choose the world of their own invention. This, in varying degrees, is also true in Nora Burke, in The Shadow of the Glen, and Deirdre, in Deirdre of the Sorrows. Both have a desire for a fuller and more vigorous life, and both must ultimately make a choice between two worlds. Nora chooses to pursue her romantic tramp rather than walk the roads alone or go to the union; Deirdre chooses first to escape from Conchubar with her romantic tramp, Naisi, and chooses finally to immortalize herself forever in legend through an early death rather than submit to Conchubar's tyranny.

The Playboy of the Western World also deals with an imaginative alternative to reality, but it does so with an added dimension. Christy unconsciously identifies with the hero he creates, succumbing to positive mendacity only in proportion to the adulation he receives from his listeners. Christy's liberation from reality is ultimately complete because, helped by the community, he becomes the bard-hero he created, and fashions reality to his liking thereafter. Furthermore, Christy's growth to the stature of bard-hero has more than strictly personal significance. As the latter part of this discussion will



demonstrate, Christy Mahon is both poet and parody of the national mythic hero, Cuchulain.

Two plays, The Tinker's Wedding and Riders to the Sea, will not be considered in this chapter. This is not because the characters in these plays exhibit no desire to escape from reality, but because they, unlike most of Synge's peasant figures, cannot do so. Sarah Casey hopes to change her condition, but the change is not an imaginative alternative to the reality which she must live. Sarah's hopes are frustrated; for Maurya, even the hope of changing her condition is remote. Maurya's resignation and final submission to reality is, in a sense, the very antithesis of the imaginativeness which creates an alternative to the dictates of reality, as it is so manifestly evident in The Playboy of the Western World and The Well of the Saints.

It was stated in Chapter II that blindness forces the Douls to create a world in their imagination, to which they retreat from a reality which they consider unacceptable. Neither Martin nor Mary considers this imaginative world as a second best, and they do not envy those who have the gift of sight. Mary Doul is content with her condition; she believes herself to be a "beautiful dark woman," and believes that Molly Byrne is jealous of her beauty. Martin for the most part is content with his condition but he has occasional fleeting suspicions that something is amiss. Mary, for example, does not have the sweet voice that, as a youth, he associated with beauty, yet Timmy the smith has reassured him that Mary is prettier than Molly, who does have a sweet voice. To resolve this conundrum, Martin desires to get his sight, if only for a short while:

I do be thinking in the long nights it's be a grand thing  
if we could see ourselves for one hour, or a minute itself,



the way we'd know surely we were the finest man, and the finest woman, of the seven counties of the east...and then the seeing rabble below might be destroying their souls telling bad lies, and we'd never heed a thing they'd say. (III,73)

Mary, however, is not enticed by this prospect, and she chides Martin for heeding the villagers at all:

If you weren't a big fool you wouldn't heed them this hour Martin Doul, for they're a bad lot those that have their sight, and they do have great joy, the time they do be seeing a grand thing, to let on they don't see it at all, and to be telling fools' lies, the like of what Molly Byrne was telling to yourself. (III,73)

For Mary, the world of sight represents a world of deceit and villainy, and she has no particular desire to be involved with it. She, a dark woman, is sure at least of what is beautiful and grand; seeing people, on the other hand, see grand sights, like herself, but often pretend not to.

The gift of sight completely changes the Douls' world. Both Martin and Mary quickly realize that the imaginary world in which they had lived was only a comforting fiction, a fiction from which they could expect no comfort as long as they could see the actual world. The destruction of their imaginary world is tragic because of the terrific disparity between their imaginative vision of the world, and the world which they see around them. The intensity of their disillusionment is expressed by Martin, who regrets that he ever desired to see:

Grand day, is it? Or a black day when I was roused up and found I was the like of the little children do be listening to the stories of an old woman, and do be dreaming after in the dark night that it's in grand houses of gold they are, with speckled horses to ride, and do be waking again, in a short while, and they destroyed with the cold, and the thatch dripping maybe, and the starved ass braying in the yard? (III,113)



Martin's disillusionment is greater than Mary's, because he does not forsake his imagination even after he regains his sight. Mary believes herself to be beautiful only as long as she is blind, but makes no mention of this illusion after she discovers the truth. Martin, on the other hand, continues to deceive himself even after he has regained his sight. In his imagination, he still regards himself as a fine looking man, a romantic tramp who would be a worthy companion for Molly Byrne. He realizes the truth about himself slowly, and only after Molly scorns his advances and finally has Timmy drive him away.

Redemption comes for the Douls when they, both blind again, meet at the cross-roads and reconcile themselves to each other. The imaginary world in which they once lived is gone, and the reality they have experienced makes it impossible to recreate this world. This matters very little, however, because they start to create a new vision of themselves and their future almost immediately. When Mary recalls seeing her own reflection in a pool, she does not call to mind her own ugliness, but imagines rather the promise of beauty:

For when I seen myself in them pools, I seen my hair  
would be grey, or white maybe in a short while, and I  
seen with it that I'd a face would be a great wonder  
when it'll have soft white hair falling around it, the  
way when I'm an old woman there won't be the like of me  
surely in the seven countries of the east. (III,129)

Martin, who will be "as bald as an old turnip" (III,129) in his old age has no such consolation, so he looks forward to dignified beauty of another sort:

I'll be letting my beard grow in a short while—a beautiful,  
long, white, silken, streamy beard, you won't see the like  
of in the eastern world....Ah, a white beard's a grand  
thing on an old man, a grand thing for making the quality  
stop and be stretching out their hands with good silver



or gold, and a beard's a thing you'll never have, so  
you may be holding your tongue. (III.131)

Once they have this hope for themselves, their imaginations come alive, and they once again start to enjoy the natural world around them. They know, however, that this beautiful world will last only so long as they are blind. Their beautiful thoughts cannot survive in the real world, and so they run at the second approach of the saint. If blindness is a poor thing, it is even worse to have sight:

It's a poor thing, God help us, and what good'll our grey hairs be itself, if we have our sight, the way we'll see them falling each day, and turning dirty with the rain? (III,135)

Martin and Mary prefer blindness to the real world as they have experienced it. Their refusal to be dominated by reality thus leads to Martin's irreverent, but liberating, action of striking the holy water from the Saint's hand. The Douls leave the village regarded as villains, but with the hope that they will be known again in another place as "the people [who are] happy and blind" (III,143).

The role of imagination as liberator is also particularly strong in the three of Synge's plays that deal with tramps and vagabond heroes, The Shadow of the Glen, Deirdre of the Sorrows, and The Playboy of the Western World.<sup>3</sup> For Synge, the tramp represented an escape from a colourless reality to some ideal dream world. In the life of the vagrant, Synge observed "a certain wildness that gives it romance and a peculiar value for those who look at life in Ireland with an eye that is aware of the arts also" (II,208). This singular wildness and romance is reflected in Synge's vagrant heroes, the Tramp, Naisi, and Christy.

The Tramp, Naisi, and Christy Mahon have a family likeness; to their women they are symbols of poetic revolt against the colourless daily fare of life. The women to whom they appeal, Nora Burke, Deirdre,



and Pegeen Mike, all have a desire to live a fuller and more vigorous life than the one which they envision to be their lot. For each of them, a vagrant hero offers an escape to a more ideal life. Naisi offers Deirdre a life of romantic exile in Alban, away from the tyranny of Conchubar; the Tramp offers Nora a world of natural splendour, away from the oppression of the glen and the tyranny of Dan Burke; Christy offers Pegeen a life of pastoral luxury pacing the sides of Neifin, or poaching fish in the Owen or the Carrowmore. The romantic visionary quality of these three heroes is also evident in their naïveté about the often brutal nature of reality. Naisi does not regard the prophecy about Deirdre seriously, and is at first reluctant to return to Emain Macha, believing that they can find another place of safety, once their sanctuary in Alban has been invaded. The Tramp cannot believe that Dan would actually turn Nora out, nor can he believe that Michael no longer wants her. So too, Christy cannot believe the viciousness of mankind: "What joy would they have to bring hanging to the likes of me?" (IV,109).

To return to the central focus of this discussion, it must be noted that the appeal of Synge's vagabond heroes is largely indirect. They do not liberate their heroines so much in a physical sense as in an imaginative one. Naisi appeals to Deirdre not only because he is willing to take her away from Conchubar's control, but also because he offers her a life that is imaginative and exciting. So too, Nora is not so much attracted to the Tramp as she is to the life which he represents. Christy's appeal is also indirect, and it is greater than that of either Naisi or the Tramp; he is a symbol of liberation not only for Pegeen, but for the whole community into which he brings life and vitality. And, unlike either Naisi or the Tramp, Christy creates an



imaginary retreat from reality that surpasses either Alban or life on the roads. His is a romantic vision of life that has neither old age or cold nights; it is, in short, a poetic vision. The remainder of this discussion will focus on Christy, considering not only his vision of himself, but considering also what I believe to be Synge's vision of Christy, as bard-hero and mock Cuchulain. This approach is not being introduced at this time simply to illustrate Synge's familiarity with Irish legend. Rather, by considering The Playboy of the Western World in light of the Cuchulain saga, two levels of imagination will be explored, that of the author as well as that of his character.

Critical discussion of Synge's relationship to Irish mythology has been confined mainly to his relationship to the Ossianic cycle. His relationship to the Red Branch cycle has, for the most part, remained unexplored, except for Deirdre of the Sorrows.<sup>4</sup> The Playboy of the Western World has no complete analogy in the Ulster myths as has Deirdre of the Sorrows, but there is, I suggest, sufficient evidence in the Playboy, both general and specific, to indicate that Christy is both poet and hero, a twentieth century version of the epic hero, Cuchulain. Synge's possible motivation for writing a parody of the Cuchulain myth has been speculated upon by Mrs. Bessai, in her study of Synge's relationship to the Red Branch myths:

Perhaps because he was aware of the absurdities in a nationalist movement that saw in Cuchulain the spirit of a new as well as the old Ireland, he gave his Irish audience a mock-heroic version of the Red Branch buried in the framework of a peasant comedy.<sup>5</sup>

Basically the myth of Cuchulain, as outlined by Lady Gregory, is as follows. Cuchlain's parents are Saultim and Dechtire, but Cuchlain's real father is the semi-deific Lug of the Long Hand.<sup>6</sup> As a boy, Cuchlain is known as Setanta, and is noted for his remarkable



skill at the Irish game of hurling. He receives the name Cuchulain, literally Culann's Hound, by slaying the fierce watchdog of the smith Culann, and by offering as retribution to take the place of the hound until he could replace it with a watchdog just as fierce. As a young warrior, Cuchulain studies the crowning feats of war on the Isle of Skye from the warrior-witch Sgathach, and conquers another woman warrior, Aoife, by whom he has a son. On his return to Ireland, Cuchulain courts the beautiful maiden Emer with riddles, and finally wins her for his wife. In the War of the Words, the wives of Cuchulain, Laegaire, and Conall, argue as to which of the three is most deserving of the title of champion, and the three heroes submit to tests. The final test is won by Cuchulain, when he alone of the three can keep his bargain with the mysterious stranger, Uath. By agreement, Cuchulain beheads Uath one night, but the magician leaves unhurt. On the next night, Uath returns to behead Cuchulain, who submits to his part of the bargain unflinchingly. Uath therefore does not hebead Cuchulain, but reveals himself to be Curoi, a king chosen to judge the championship, and declares Cuchulain champion. Cuchulain goes on from that day to excel in all feats of war, and the idol of all women, proves his mettle in the war of the Bull of Cailgne. In a later episode, he meets his son by Aoife, unknown to himself, on Baile's Strand, and kills him in combat. With his dying words the boy reveals his identity to Cuchulain, who is taken by a fit of raging grief. Conchubar, the high king, has a Druidic spell cast over Cuchulain, setting him to fight the waves of the sea for three day and nights until his rage abates. Shortly after this episode, Cuchulain is killed by a mortal blow, fighting valiantly, but tricked by the witchcraft of the three one-eyed daughters of Calatin.<sup>7</sup>



The Playboy does not structurally adhere to this pattern but the two stories have many points of similarity. Christy Mahon is a burlesque of the national hero, Cuchulain, but he is more than just this, for as poet he creates a myth, and then identifies with its central character. When we first meet Christy, his past is somewhat uncertain. Like the traditional hero, he enters the milieu from parts unknown, to fill the vacant role of leadership. The best of the men in the village is the vapid coward, Shawn Keogh, to whom Pegeen Mike is betrothed as a matter of a "good bargain." Pegeen first indicates the lack of any admirable or heroic men in the vicinity:

Where now will you meet the like of Daneen Sullivan knocked the eye from a peeler, or Marcus Quin, God rest him, got six months for maiming ewes, and he a great warrant to tell stories of holy Ireland till he'd have the old women shedding down tears about their feet. Where will you find the like of them, I'm saying? (IV,59)

Christy, it would seem, has come at a very opportune moment.

The first real fact that Christy reveals about his past is that he has killed his poor father, who, like the magical Uath, will miraculously return for revenge. It is interesting to note that Christy does not tell his deed outright, but engages the shebeeners with answers that are comparable to riddles. This incident is analogous to the riddles in which Cuchulain and Emer speak on their first meeting, and it has the effect of winning Pegeen's admiration for Christy.<sup>8</sup> But when the truth is out, Christy is surprised to find that he is admired by the publicans, and that he can stay in their midst, safe from the "searching law."

When Pegeen and Christy are left alone, more of Christy's past is revealed. He has a "kind of a quality name...with wide and windy acres of rich Munster land" and is "a fine, handsome young fellow



"with a noble brow" (IV, 79). Christy's somewhat exaggerated position in the southern province of Munster counterbalances Cuchulain's position in Muirthemne, in the northern province of Ulster. Pegeen hints at this analogy, although she is disappointed that it is not a true parallel: "And I thinking you should have been living the like of a king of Norway or the Eastern World" (IV, 83). (The Eastern World is here the Gaelic folk phrase meaning the Dublin side of Ireland, just as the Western World is the Atlantic side of Ireland; Western has also the connotation of 'backward' in the Irish dialect.)<sup>9</sup>

Pegeen also gives momentum to the development of the poet in Christy when she compares him to her idea of the Dingle Bay poets, who are "fine fiery fellows with great rages when their temper's roused" (IV, 81). But Christy is neither poet nor hero yet; he has heroic qualities, and poetic qualities, but as all heroes he has yet to prove himself in the situation. Once he has received Pegeen's encouragement, he starts to develop as the bard-hero, and in his next version of his deed, he has not just let the loy come down on the ridge of his father's head, but has "halved his skull" (IV, 85).

In the Cuchulain saga, Cuchulain's rise to fame and his demise are two distinct events, but Synge has fused the two into one in Christy's case. Christy's demise is the fortunate event that caused him to strike his father, and thus forms a basis for heroic stature. The tragic element of the demise is suggested by Christy while he is describing to Widow Quin the woman old Mahon had chosen for his mate:

Widow Quin. And what kind was she?

Christy (with horror). A walking terror from beyond the hills, and she two score and five years, and two hundred-weights and five pounds in the weighing scales, with a



limping leg on her, and a blinded eye, and she a woman of noted misbehavior with the old and young. (IV,101)

He goes on to describe the "dread of her curse," so powerful that crows and seabirds will not cast a shadow on her garden for fear of it; this suggests that an analogy can be drawn between Widow Casey, Christy's nemesis, and the deformed, one-eyed daughters of Calatin, the nemesis of Cuchulain.<sup>10</sup> Also associated with Christy's demise is the inversion of the episode on Baile's Strand; whereas Cuchulain kills his son, Christy will ultimately try to kill his father.

Encouraged by the attention he has received from the local girls (another parallel with Cuchulain), Christy once again embellishes his account of the confrontation with his father:

He gave a drive with the scythe, and I gave a leap to the east. Then I turned around with my back to the north, and I hit a blow on the ridge of his skull, laid him stretched out, and he split to the knob of his gullet. (IV,103)

In true epic-heroic fashion, Christy drives the fatal blow with his back to the north, that is, facing his opponent, with his back to the only direction of retreat. As the romance between Christy and Pegeen develops, Christy metamorphoses from "a quiet, simple poor fellow"(IV, 83) to a "gallant orphan cleft his father with one blow to the breeches belt"(IV,119). The blow, in Christy's mind at least, has now reached an epic savagery.

Christy's increase in stature is by no means reassuring to Shawn, who, in an effort to re-establish himself in his former relation to Pegeen, tries to bribe Christy with gifts, including a ticket to the United States. This fails, just as Maeve failed to bribe Cuchulain in the War for the Bull of Cailgne. In this, Synge finds the perfect opportunity to parody the epic hero, and to burlesque the idea of



marriage as a "good bargain." Cuchulain refused the bribe because, as he replies, "I would never consent to give in to a woman, or to be under a woman's rule."<sup>11</sup> Christy, on the other hand, will not accept the bribe because he cannot be under anyone's rule except that of Pegeen Mike, though he has no property with which to commend himself to her as has Shawn. When Shawn cannot bribe Christy, he seeks the aid of Widow Quin, whom he also tries to bribe with gifts of epic proportions.

It is quite significant that, just as Christy seems to become important in the eyes of the men whom he rivals for leadership, old Mahon should reappear, not to substantiate the heroic claims of his son, but to speak of him only derisively. To some degree, old Mahon speaks with Synge's voice when he describes Christy as a rather shiftless, vain fellow, with no way with the girls, and as one who cannot hold his liquor, or smoke—who in general is aptly described as "the looney of Mahon's" (IV,123). Synge is not deriding his hero with any malice, but is satirizing the form of hero who might receive the form of adulation that the Mayoites give Christy on the strength of his story. Up to the sports events, Christy has become heroic purely out of intoxication with his own lie. Despite his pugnaciousness towards Shawn, Christy is still the "looney of Mahon's," a far cry from the Hound of Culann, in the true heroic sense. Old Mahon's appearance has ruined Christy's art, but fortunately only in the eyes of Widow Quin. Bursting into laughter at Christy, who is cringing behind the door until old Mahon leaves, Widow Quin expresses ironically what all must feel is Christy's real stature at this point: "Well, you're the walking playboy of the western world, and that's the poor man you had divided to his breeches belt" (IV,125).



The real irony of Widow Quin's statement arises from the ambiguity of the word "playboy". It can mean one who is played with, as Christy is played upon to fill the role of hero to meet the need of the shebeeners. It can also mean champion, as Christy the hero. Still another meaning is one full of the play spirit, as Christy the poet, perhaps. The most significant meaning of the word here is its literal meaning, "boy of the game", a slang term for one who is engaged in the Irish game of hurling.<sup>12</sup> It has been noted that this is the game for which Cuchulain won renown as a boy. Christy is the playboy of the western world, but playboy as humbug, a comic counterpart to the young Cuchulain, the playboy of the eastern (Ulster) world.

Fortunately for Christy, Widow Quin has little of Christy's 'heroic' gallantry and she can be bribed to silence. There is, besides, a common bond between them; both Christy and Widow Quin are warriors of repute, at least in the eyes of the village, and so they share a confidence which parallels that between Cuchulain and the warrior-witch Sgathach.<sup>13</sup> Christy therefore combines twentieth-century common sense with epic desire to gain the prize, and bribes Widow Quin to silence, remaining, for the time being, the playboy of the western world.

Act III opens with an exposition of Christy's athletic feats in his now seemingly secure role of hero-poet. Like Cuchulain, Christy is undefeated in feats that involve more than human skill; even the mighty Cuchulain had the aid of magic when he required it. In like manner, Christy seems to have magic on his side, causing Jimmy to exclaim, "He's right luck, I'm telling you" (IV, 131). The ensuing conversation between Jimmy and Philly on skulls and the bones of the giant man, the like of whom "you wouldn't meet the like of these days in the cities



of the world"(IV,135), appears to be meant to expressly draw attention to the days of old, and to contrast epic heroes with the hero we see coming into his own before our eyes.

The mule race, in which Christy secures his role as hero, provides another opportunity for Synge to parody the epic hero. Contrasted with Cuchulain's prowess in the chariot is Christy, falling off his mule but coming back from behind to win the race. This has its analogy in the Cuchulain myth, in an episode in which Cuchulain comes from behind to win a chariot race to Cruachan, one of the tests in choosing the champion in the War of Words. Even Christy's mule seems to sense that it has a hero on its back, and gallops along "kicking at the stars"(IV,141). In this respect the mule earns a place next to Cuchulain's Grey of Macha, whose fierce hooves "throw up sods of earth like a flock of swift birds after him."<sup>14</sup>

Old Mahon, who has made his way after Christy by telling the story of the encounter with his son in true minstrel fashion, singing his tale for bed and board, returns and admires the young champion he sees at the seashore. He cannot, however, understand the champion's popularity when he suspects that he is Christy. He has never "till this day confused that dribbling idiot with a likely man"(IV,143), and so, considering himself mad, goes to the Union beyond. Meanwhile, Christy returns from the seashore to a hero's welcome, and the poet-hero's laurels: "A bagpipes! A fiddle was played by a poet in the years gone by! A flat and three-thorned blackthorn would lick the scholars out of Dublin town!"(IV,145). Christy, with true heroic modesty, accepts:

Thank you kindly, the lot of you. But you'd say it was little only I did this day if you'd seen me a while since striking my one single blow. (IV,147)



Christy's imaginary world is now almost complete; he has only to secure the real prize he is after, Pegeen Mike. His courting now begins in earnest, and he plies her with flattery, and promises her a life of romantic wandering. One might regard his delightfully romantic visions of the future as the growth of his poetic faculty, for by his father's words, Christy was "a dunce never reached his second book" (IV, 137). Pegeen, in return, has completely fallen victim to her own vision of Christy. She now must have Christy, "that has such poet's talking, and such bravery of heart" (IV, 149); she can no longer content herself with Shawn Keogh, who has "no savagery or fine fords in him at all" (IV, 153).

Shawn, of course, opposes Christy's intentions of marrying Pegeen, whereupon Christy threatens Shawn with his life. Michael, at this point, assumes the voice of Conchubar, high king, and tries to abate the rage of Christy-Cuchulain by sending him to fight by the sea, recalling the episode on Baile's Strand:

Murder is it? Is it mad yous are? Would you go making murder in this place, and it piled with poteen for our drink tonight? Go on to the foreshore if it's fighting you want, where the rising tide will wash all traces from the memory of man. (IV, 15)

Shawn cannot put up a defense, so, in an inversion of the Bull of Cailgne saga, he unsuccessfully bids Michael defend him, or lose his "drift of heifers and...blue bull from Sneem" (IV, 155).

Pegeen and Christy finally receive the blessing of Michael, when like the magical stranger, Uath, old Mahon reappears to confront his son. Christy is now forced to defend himself before all, both as poet and as hero. As poet, he must try to preserve the imaginary world he has created for himself and Pegeen, or risk the possibility of returning to the hard reality he knew with his father. As hero, he



must defend the playboy of the western world, the hero whom he has created and identified with. His defense as a poet is actually a sad realization of the poet's place:

Shut your yelling, for if you're after making a mighty man of me this day by the power of a lie, you're setting me now to think if it's a poor thing to be lonesome, it's worse maybe go mixing with the fools of the earth. (IV, 165)

But as the true hero now, he vindicates himself by vanquishing his father in deed, as he has throughout the play been vanquishing him in fancy. He becomes "a proven hero in the end of all" (IV, 167), for his actions no longer require the popular support; his refusal to be intimidated in this final moment of crisis, and his ability to assume the role which he has projected upon himself, raises him, finally, to the stature of the epic hero Cuchulain.

Pegeen, unfortunately, views matters differently; she was able to accept Christy's fantasy only as long as she did not have to make a choice between that and the real world. When she discovers that Christy's promises for the future are based on a fantasy, she, unlike Nora Burke, prefers to remain in familiar surroundings. She cannot accept the possibility that Christy's fantasy can become reality; for her there is an antagonism between the dream, and the dream become menacing reality that requires a choice:

I'll say a strange man is marvel with his mighty talk; but what's a squabble in your back-yard and the blow of a loy, have taught me that there's a great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed. (IV, 169)

In heroic fashion Christy faces his last battle, determined to shed some blood before he is taken. Mahon intercedes for him by once more reappearing, as if like Uath he really is indestructible. Old Mahon and Christy leave triumphant both, but with Christy clearly



poet, hero, and undisputed champion. Father and son, Mrs. Bessai has noted, are ultimately reunited, "with a mythically appropriate reversal of their positions."<sup>15</sup> Christy leaves the community confident in his new-found strength, but aware also of the debt which he owes to the community which was equal creator of his new role:

Ten thousand blessings upon all that's here, for you've turned me a likely gaffer in the end of all, the way I'll go romancing through a romping lifetime from this hour to the dawning of the judgement day. (IV,173)

There is nothing left to Pegeen now, but to lament like Emer over Cuchulain at the end of the Ulster cycle of myths, over the loss of her bard-hero: "Oh my grief, I've lost him surely. I've lost the only playboy of the western world" (IV,173). Her lament is not only for her own loss, but for the lost vision of a whole community, to which the opportunity to escape from the drab reality of everyday existence may not come again.

Christy's ability to identify completely with the imaginary world he creates is extreme; no other of Synge's peasant figures is so totally overcome by his or her imaginativeness as is Christy. On the other hand, Christy's imaginary world is not the product of a single imagination, but is created by the projections, the desire to escape from a drab reality, of a whole community. Although that imaginative escape comes to an end for all but Christy, the desire to escape certainly does not - not, at least, for Pegeen Mike.

The aim of the previous discussion was not to intimate that all of Synge's peasants escape from reality, or create their own, more tolerable reality, as does Christy. It has been, rather, to point out that such a desire is strong, and that it exists in all of his figures. Some of them could not, some of them would not, willingly leave their familiar world.



All of them, however, envision a world that is like Christy's, or like Martin and Mary Doul's, a world to which they can retreat to enjoy the pristine products of the human imagination.



## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

His Characters are clearly drawn from the soil, they are instinct with life, recognisably human and authentic, yet they are also big enough to be types or symbols of humanity, they carry something of that weight of enduring universal significance that only figures in epic or legend<sup>1</sup> or great poetic drama carry...

The preceding chapters may possibly have raised more questions than they answered. One question, probably the most important question one must ask when one deals with Synge's mythology, is that of realism. While Synge has usually been regarded as a realist, it is clear that he is not a realist in the commonly accepted sense of the term, that is, as one who believes that the aim of art is to depict life with complete and objective honesty. The whole basis of Synge's art, as is clear from his prefaces, is in reality imaginatively conceived.

Synge's peasant figures are not representative of the Irish peasantry, nor are the incidents of his plays realistic, insofar as they do not typify Irish peasant life. His drama is realistic only in the sense that it conveys the essence of a locale or of a character.

What distinguishes Synge's characters from those of Ibsen, for example, is their dynamic wholeness. In other words, Synge's emphasis is on the total personality, rather than on the traits which most clearly distinguish one character from another. As Ronald Gaskell points out in his article, "The Realism of J. M. Synge", the "energy [of Synge's character] counts for more than the marks left by the struggle toward self-determination."<sup>2</sup>



Synge's characters are able to visualize the world around them, and they have a sensual perception of each other. For this reason they are realistic, even though the situations in which they find themselves are often not realistic. Each of Synge's peasant figures has a strong sense of his or her own total personality, and in this respect they are possibly more real than the socially aware heroines of Ibsen's drama, or the tenement dwellers of O'Casey's. This is true not only of his comedies, but also of his tragedies. Synge did not agree with Yeats that tragedy excludes character. For example, Deirdre of the Sorrows is tragic largely because of the awareness that characters have of themselves and of each other.

Living among the Irish peasantry, Synge gained a keen insight into their lives. He became familiar with the difficulties and problems they faced in their daily life, and he became familiar also with the folk-lore and the flights of fancy in which they found relief from their daily cares. He gave both aspects of their lives dramatic expression in his plays, in the fear of Deirdre for her fading beauty, in the hopes of Martin Doul for a fine white beard, in the tragic sufferings of Maurya, and in the delightful wooing of Pegeen and Christy.

To understand and fully appreciate Synge's peasant figures, one must have some notion of Synge's broader mythology, which, I have tried to suggest, is rooted in "the springtime of the local life" (IV,54). By turning to the living folk-tradition of the Irish peasantry, Synge was able to create a drama that is as distinctive in incident and character as it is colourful in diction. His plays abound in allusions to incidents and bits of folk-lore which he heard from the Aran Islanders and the people of Wicklow and Kerry. Indeed, Synge's remark about the



relation of a circumstance to the effect that it had "the dramatic emphasis of the folk-tale" (II,107), suggests that he considered the folk-tale itself a dramatic form. It is not surprising then that folk-lore and folk-tradition should hold a place of prominence in his art. By fusing his own observations of peasant Ireland with his knowledge of its living folk-tradition, Synge was able to create a drama that is full of "reality" and "joy".

The various elements which most clearly manifest themselves in this regard have been the subject of this dissertation. If Synge's figures seem, at times, to be extravagant either in their joys or in their griefs, it must be remembered that he was dealing with "what is superb and wild in reality" (IV,54). In the Preface to The Playboy of the Western World, Synge, referring to the Irish peasantry, states: I am glad to acknowledge how much I owe to the folk-imagination of these fine people. Anyone who has lived in real intimacy with the Irish peasantry will know that the wildest sayings and ideas in this play are tame indeed compared with the fancies one may hear in any little hillside cabin in Geesala, or Carraroe, or Dingle Bay. (IV,53)

The quality of Synge's drama has perhaps been best characterized by Daniel Corkery, who wrote the "folk-lore, and in general the literature of the folk-mind, is imagination at its most unrestrained."<sup>3</sup>



## FOOTNOTES

### CHAPTER I

<sup>1</sup> Synge, Collected Works. All subsequent references to Synge's works will be to the Collected Works (Oxford, 1962-1968), and will be given in the text as a volume number, followed by the page number, in parentheses.

<sup>2</sup> Greene and Stephens, J. M. Synge: 1871-1909, 150ff. On the occasion of the first presentation of The Shadow of the Glen, on October 8, 1903, the play was denounced in the newspaper The Irish Independant hours before it appeared on stage.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Corkery, Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature.

<sup>4</sup> For a study of Synge's sources see Adelaide Estill, The Sources of Synge, or Maurice Bourgeois's J. M. Synge and the Irish Theatre.

<sup>5</sup> Gertrude Schoepperle, "John Synge and His Old French Farce", The North American Review, CCXIV (1921), 503-513. See also Bourgeois, 187f.

<sup>6</sup> Bourgeois, 63.

<sup>7</sup> Padraic Colum, The Road Round Ireland, 370. The other individual to whom Synge admitted a foreign source was William Butler Yeats.

<sup>8</sup> Bourgeois, 91.

<sup>9</sup> Cornelius Weygandt, Irish Plays and Playwrights, 171.

<sup>10</sup> Alan Price, Synge and Anglo-Irish Drama, 64.

<sup>11</sup> Price, 64.

<sup>12</sup> David Greene, "Synge and the Celtic Revival", Modern Drama, IV (1961), 294; "Synge's Unfinished Deirdre", PMLA, LXII (1948), 1314.

<sup>13</sup> For a complete list of the sagas of the Ultonian cycle, see Hyde's Literary History of Ireland, 361-362. The foremost sagas of this cycle are "Cuchulain", "Deirdre", the "Cattle-Raid of Cooley", and the "Death of Cuchulain".

<sup>14</sup> Ossian is also spelled Ossean, or Oisin, and has little relationship to the Ossian of Macpherson, who is a mixture of the heroes of two cycles, the Red Branch and the Fenian, which Macpherson confused. For a further discussion on this score see Hyde's Literary History of Ireland, 364ff.

<sup>15</sup> Greene and Stephens, 162.



## CHAPTER II

<sup>1</sup> Maurice Bourgeois, J. M. Synge and the Irish Theatre, 90.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 218.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Corkery, Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature, 105.

<sup>5</sup> Hugh Maclean, University of Kansas City Review, XXI (1954), 9-19.

<sup>6</sup> F. L. Lucas, The Drama of Chekhov, Synge, Yeats and Pirandello, 207.

<sup>7</sup> Synge, Collected Works, IV 3-4. In earlier drafts to The Tinker's Wedding Synge included an apology to the clergy if any of his plays should seem irreverent to them, but omitted this in the final draft because he was sure that they would realize that they were being laughed at without malice.

<sup>8</sup> Bourgeois, 90.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>10</sup> Corkery, 24.

<sup>11</sup> Frenzel, 45, in Alan Price's Synge and Anglo-Irish Drama.

<sup>12</sup> Herbert Howarth, 240.

<sup>13</sup> Douglas Hyde, The Religious Songs of Connacht, I, 209.

<sup>14</sup> David Krause, "The Rageous Ossean: Patron-Hero of Synge and O'Casey", Modern Drama, IV (1961-62), 276-277.

<sup>15</sup> Séan O'Suilleabhain, Irish Wake Amusements, 136ff.

<sup>16</sup> Bourgeois, 218.

<sup>17</sup> Corkery, 206; Greene, "Synge's Unfinished Deirdre", PMLA, LXIII (December 1948), 1314.

<sup>18</sup> Synge, Collected Works, 393. In Appendix C, editor Ann Saddlemeyer notes all passages in the play which could have come from Synge's private notebooks, and she concludes that there is no evidence to suggest that Synge relied on his own translation to any appreciable extent.

<sup>19</sup> Douglas Hyde, A. Literary History of Ireland, 302-318.  
Lady Gregory, Cuchulain of Muirthemne.

<sup>20</sup> James F. Kilroy, Dominant Themes and Ironic Techniques in the Works of J. M. Synge, 52ff.



<sup>21</sup>

The probable source for the play is an incident related to Synge in Wicklow and recorded in the essay "At a Wicklow Fair", Collected Works, II, 228-229

<sup>22</sup>

Alan Price, Synge and Anglo-Irish Drama, 130.

<sup>23</sup>

Johnston, John Millington Synge, 10.

<sup>24</sup>

Krause, 285.

<sup>25</sup>

Standish O'Grady, History of Ireland, I, 37.

<sup>26</sup>

Hyde, Religious Songs, I, 211.

<sup>27</sup>

Bourgeois, 179.

<sup>28</sup>

Dr. Hyde is unsure as to what Latin words the Lout may have meant by "mamram pego." The other passage quoted suggests that the two words may be a corrupt form of "manus," for hand, and "pensio," for payment; hence, "hand-payment" or "hand-money."

<sup>29</sup>

Hyde, Religious Songs, II, 309.

<sup>30</sup>

Ibid., 311.

<sup>31</sup>

Corkery, 373.

<sup>32</sup>

Bourgeois, 191-192, finds the action of dashing the holy water from the Saint's hand un-Irish; he is also incredulous to the people's indifferent reaction to the miracle that has been performed in their presence. Martin's irreverent gesture has its parallel in the disputed scene in The Countless Cathleen, where Shemus trods the shrine underfoot.

<sup>33</sup>

Corkery, 173.

<sup>34</sup>

Krause, 284.

<sup>35</sup>

Ibid., 282.

<sup>36</sup>

Susan Solomont, The Comic Effect of "The Playboy of the Western World". M. J. Sidnell, "Synge's Playboy and the Champion of Ulster", Dalhousie Review, XLV (1965), 51-59.

Diane Bessai, "Little Hound in Mayo: Synge's Playboy and the Comic Tradition in Irish Literature", Dalhousie Review, XLVIII (1968), 372-383. Herbert Howarth, The Irish Writers, 1880-1940.

David Krause, "The Rageous Ossean: Patron-Hero of Synge and O'Casey", Modern Drama, IV (1961-62), 268-291.

<sup>37</sup>

Krause, 283.

<sup>38</sup>

Price, 163.

<sup>39</sup>

For a full discussion of the morality issue in The Playboy see Norman Podhoretz, "Synge's Playboy: Morality and the Hero", Essays in Criticism, III (July 1953), 337-334.



<sup>40</sup> Hyde, The Religious Songs of Connacht, I, 211

<sup>41</sup> Hyde, The Love Songs of Connacht, 61.

<sup>42</sup> Solomont, 55.

<sup>43</sup> Corkery, 108.

<sup>44</sup> Johnston, 20.

### CHAPTER III

<sup>1</sup> Maurice Bourgeois, J.M. Synge and the Irish Theatre, 90.

<sup>2</sup> Alan Price, Synge and Anglo-Irish Drama, 216-217.

<sup>3</sup> This incident of the Aran Islanders concealing the Connaught man is only one such incident in a long history of hostility to English oppression, with which they associate the police and the magistrates, and general political agitation. One might compare this incident with the following verse from Douglas Hyde's collection:

It is with the people I was,  
It is not with the law I was;  
But they took me in my sleep,  
On the side of Conc-na-Feigh;  
and so  
Tommorrow they will hang me.

<sup>4</sup> Francis Bickley, J. M. Synge and the Irish Dramatic Movement, 25.

<sup>5</sup> Herbert Howarth, The Irish Writers, 1880-1940, 228.

<sup>6</sup> Una Ellis-Fermor, The Irish Dramatic Movement, 166.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 166ff.

<sup>8</sup> For a further discussion of Maurya's attitude to the deaths of her men-folk, see Ronald Gaskell, "The Realism of J.M. Synge", Critical Quarterly, V (1963), 242-246.

<sup>9</sup> F.L. Lucas, The Drama of Chekhov, Synge, Yeats and Pirandello, 174.

<sup>10</sup> René Huchon, George Crabbe and His Times: 1754-1832, 160 ff. In this book, the translator (from the French) Frederick Clarke, cites another work, Sydney's The Early Days of the Nineteenth Century in England, as a source for documented cases of such practices on the coasts of England, the last known case to have been in 1811. Synge's play is set "one or more centuries ago" so there is no reason why Martin Doul should not know of the practice. In The Village, Bk I, 101-116, George Crabbe also alludes to this practice.

<sup>11</sup> Price, 128.



## CHAPTER IV

<sup>1</sup> Maurice Bourgeois, J. M. Synge and the Irish Theatre, 220.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>3</sup> The romantic glorification of the tramp and the vagabond that is so evident in Synge is also evident in the works of other Anglo-Irish dramatists, notably Padraic Colum, in The Fiddler's House, Lady Gregory, in The Travelling Man, "Rutherford Mayne", in, The Turn of the Road, and Seumas O'Kelly, in The Shuiler's Child.

<sup>4</sup> Some very notable work has, however, been done in this area by the following critics:

Diane Bessai, "Little Hound in Mayo: Synge's Playboy and the Comic Tradition in Irish Literature", Dalhousie Review, XLVIII (1968), 372-383; M. J. Sidnell, "Synge's Playboy and the Champion of Ulster", Dalhousie Review, XLV (1965), 51-59;

Susan Solomont, The Comic Effect of "The Playboy of the Western World".

<sup>5</sup> Bessai, 373.

<sup>6</sup> Dechtire, Conchubar's sister, is always the mother of Cuchulain; Cuchulain's paternity varies with tradition; in some versions it is Sualtim, in others it is Lug of the Long Hand, and in others it is Conchubar himself.

<sup>7</sup> Lady Gregory, Cunchulain of Muirthemne, 321

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>9</sup> Bourgeois, 193.

<sup>10</sup> Gregory, 321.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>12</sup> Bourgeois, 193.

<sup>13</sup> Bessai, 379.

<sup>14</sup> Gregory, 66.

<sup>15</sup> Bessai, 375.

## CHAPTER V

<sup>1</sup> Alan Price, Synge and Anglo-Irish Drama, 64.

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Gaskell, "The Realism of J.M. Synge", Critical Quarterly, V (1963), 243.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Corkery, Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature, 78.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alspach, R. K. "Synge's Well of the Saints", London Times Literary Supplement, December 28, 1935, 899.

Bauman, Richard. "John Millington Synge and Irish Folklore", Southern Folk-lore Quarterly, XXVII (1963), 267-279.

Bessai, D. E. "Little Hound in Mayo: Synge's Playboy and the Comic Tradition in Irish Literature", Dalhousie Review, XLVIII (1968), 372-383.

Bickley, Francis. J.M. Synge and the Irish Dramatic Movement. London: Constable, 1912.

Bourgeois, Maurice. J.M. Synge and the Irish Theatre. London: Constable, 1913.  
Bronx: Benjamin, 1965.

Boyd, Ernest A. The Contemporary Drama of Ireland. Dublin: Talbot, 1918.

Collins, R. L. "The Distinction of Riders to the Sea", University of Kansas City Review, XIII (1947), 278-285.

Colum, Padraic. The Road Round Ireland. New York: MacMillan Company, 1927.

Combs, William W. "J. M. Synge's Riders to the Sea: A Reading and Some Generalizations", Papers of the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts and Letters, L (1965), 599-607.

Corkery, Daniel. Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature: A Study. London: Longmans, 1931.  
Dublin: Cork University Press, 1931.

Cusack, Cyril. "A Player's Reflection on Playboy", Modern Drama, IV (1961), 300-305.

Ellis-Fermor, Una. The Irish Dramatic Movement. London: Methuen and Company, Ltd. 1954.

Estill, Adelaide D. The Sources of Synge. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Press (University of Pennsylvania), 1939.

Fackler, Herbert V. "J.M. Synge's Deirdre of the Sorrows: Beauty Only", Modern Drama, XI (1969), 404-409.

Fausset, H. L'A. "Synge and Tragedy", The Fortnightly Review, CXV (February 1924), 258-273.



Fulbeck. John Fredrick. A Comparative Study of Poetic Elements in Selected Plays by John Millington Synge and by Frederico Garcia Lorca. University of Southern California, Ph. D. 1960; Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1960.

Frenzel, Herbert Von. John Millington Synge's Works as a Contribution to Irish Folk-lore and to the Psychology of Primitive Tribes. n.p.: 1932.

Gaskell, Ronald. "The Realism of J. M. Synge", Critical Quarterly, V (1963), 242-248.

Greene, David H., and Edward M. Stephens. J.M. Synge, 1871-1909. New York: MacMillan, 1959.

Greene, David H. "Synge and the Celtic Revival", Modern Drama, IV (1961), 292-299.

-----. "Synge's Unfinished Deirdre", PMLA, LXIII (1948), 1314-1321.

-----. "The Shadow of the Glen and the Widow of Ephesus", PMLA, LXII (1947), 233-238

-----. "The Tinker's Wedding, a Revaluation", PMLA, LXII (1947), 824-827.

Gregory, Lady Augusta. Cuchulain of Muirthemne. London: John Murray, 1934.

Howarth, Herbert. The Irish Writers, 1880-1940: Literature Under Parnell's Star. London: Rockliff, 1958.

Howe, Percival. J.M. Synge: A Critical Study. London: Martin Secker, 1912.

Huchon, René. George Crabbe and His Times. Translated from the French by Frederick Clarke. London: John Murray, 1907.

Hyde, Douglas.. A Literary History of Ireland. London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1967. New York: Barnes and Noble Inc., 1967.

-----. Love Songs of Connacht. Shannon: Irish University Press, 1969.

-----. The Religious Songs of Connacht. 2 vols. London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1906. Dublin: M. H. Gill and Son, Ltd., 1906.

-----. The Three Sorrows of Storytelling. London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1895.

Johnston, Denis. John Millington Synge. New York: Columbia University Press, 1965.



- Kilroy, James Francis. Dominant Themes and Ironic Techniques in the Works of J. M. Synge. University of Wisconsin, Ph. D. 1965; Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1965.
- Krause, David. "The Rageous Ossean: Patron-Hero of Synge and O'Casey", Modern Drama, IV (1961-62), 268-291.
- Leyburn, Ellen Douglas. "The Theme of Loneliness in the Plays of Synge", Modern Drama, I (1958), 84-90.
- Liljegen, "J.M. Synge, en moderne irsk Dramatiker", Englische Studien, LVIII (1924), 294-296.
- Lucas, F. L. The Drama of Chekhov, Synge, Yeats and Pirandello. London: Cassell, 1963.
- Maclean, Hugh N. "The Hero as Playboy", University of Kansas City Review, XXI (1954), 9-19.
- Meyer, Kuno, Trans. Selections from Ancient Irish Poetry. New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1911.
- O'Grady, Standish. "The Heroic Period", in his History of Ireland. Dublin: 1878.
- Orel, Harold D. "Synge's Last Play: And a Story Will Be Told Forever", Modern Drama, IV (1961), 306-313.
- O'Suilleabhain, Sean. Irish Wake Amusements. Cork: The Mercier Press, 1967.
- Pearce, Howard D. "Synge's Playboy as Mock-Christ", Modern Drama, VIII (1965), 303-310.
- Podhoretz, Norman. "Synge's Playboy: Morality and the Hero", Essays in Criticism, III (1953), 337-344.
- Price, Alan. Synge and Anglo-Irish Drama. London: Methuen, 1961.
- Schoepperle, Gertrude. "John Synge and His Old French Farce", The North American Review, CCXIV (1921), 503-513.
- Setterquist, Jan. "Ibsen and Synge", Studia Neophilologica, XXIV (1952), 69-154.
- Sidnell, M. J. "Synge's Playboy and the Champion of Ulster", Dalhousie Review, XLV (1965), 51-59.
- Solomont, Susan. The Comic Effect of "The Playboy of the Western World". Bangor: Signalman Press, 1962.
- Spacks, Patricia Meyer. "The Making of the Playboy", Modern Drama, IV (1961), 314-323.



Strong, L. A. G. John Millington Synge.  
London: Allen and Unwin, 1941.

Styan, J. L. The Dark Comedy: The Development of Modern Comic Tragedy.  
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962.

Synge, John Millington. Collected Works. Edited by Robin Skelton, Alan Price, and Ann Saddlemeyer. 4 vols. London: Oxford University Press, 1962-1968.

Weygandt, Cornelius. Irish Plays and Playwrights.  
Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, Inc., 1966.

Williams, Raymond. Drama: From Ibsen to Eliot.  
London: Chatto and Windus, 1954.

Zabel, Morton D. "Synge and the Irish", Poetry, XLII (1933), 101-106.





B29930